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THE GREAT GULF FIXED.



THE GREAT GULF FIXED.

A Novel.

BY GERALD GRANT,

AUTHOR OF

"COMING HOME TO ROOST," "OLD CROSS QUARRY," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



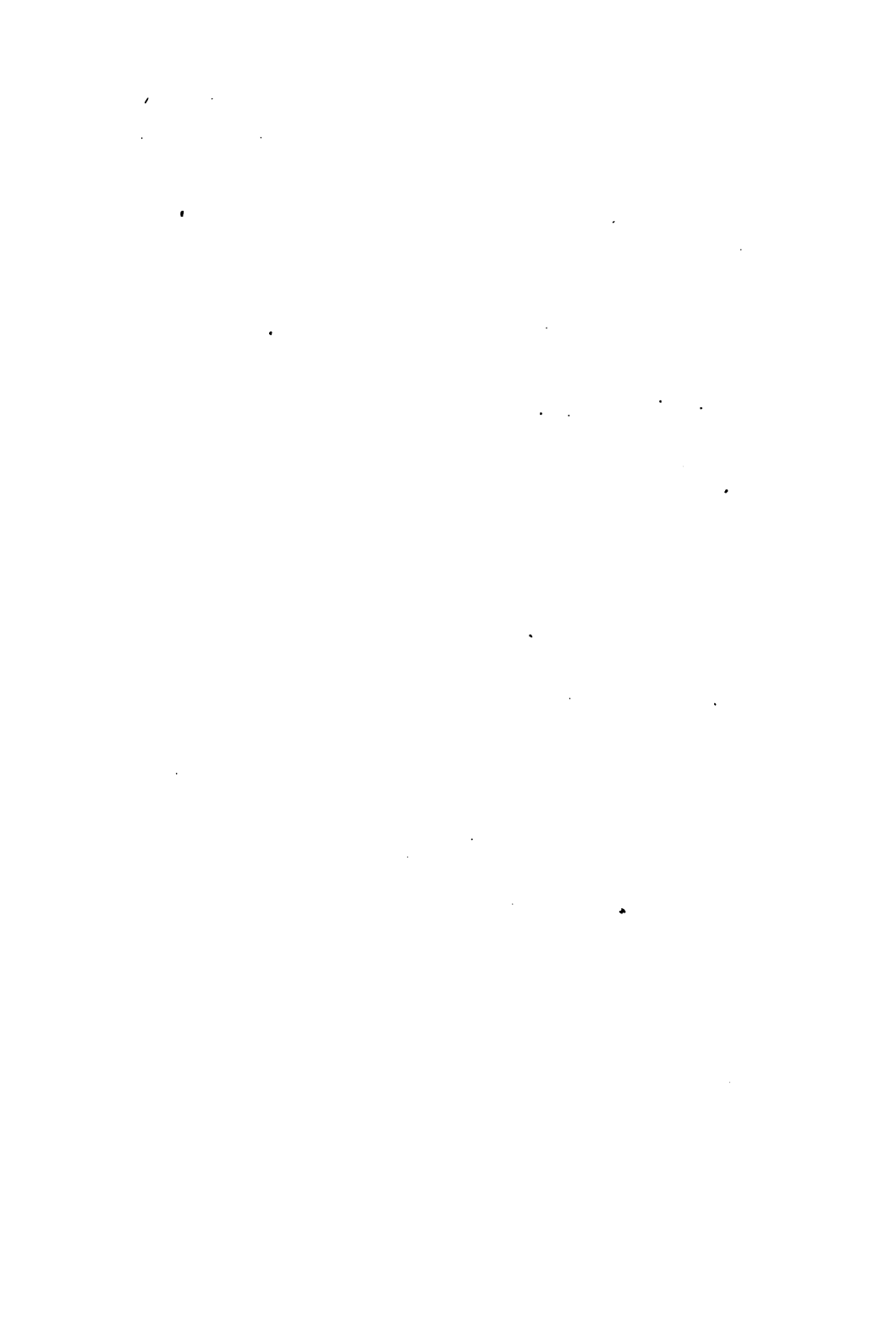
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THE GREAT GULF FIXED.

CHAPTER I.

NOT the last trumpet blast will have more power to waken the slumbering dead, than has the word "election" to rouse to life the deathlike lethargy of some of our country towns.

The old town of Woolmaston, where flourished the Barnetts and others like unto them, and four miles distant from which lay the village of Didford, slept soundly from the date of one election to that of the next, when all at once it started up, wide awake, shook itself, grew frantically excited and political—talked, wrote, debated; was noisy in its triumph, savage in its defeat—then,

the election over, there was a sudden and complete relapse. Of too drowsy a nature to keep its eyes open for long, even to its own interests, it resigned said interests into the hand of said Member, and, for itself, went quietly to sleep.

Its principles had from time immemorial been *Conservative*, as had also been the members it returned. But we know that even in our sleep we are not exempted from undergoing certain changes, and therefore, when the magic word rang out, and the good townsfolk, awaking, ranged themselves in full battle array on each of the contending sides, it was found that the *Liberal* candidate, Squire Treherne, was as well off for supporters as his friend and rival, Colonel Beverley. Yet the latter was as popular a man as any in the county; for besides being a brilliant officer, of whom it could be proud, he was a liberal-handed, open-hearted, thorough-going country gentleman of the old school. He drank hard without being a bit the worse for it, rode

hard, kept open house, lived literally, rather than figuratively, with his hand in his pocket, giving indiscriminately right and left, and was altogether such a fine fellow, that even the next heir (he had no children) had not the heart to wish him dead. He was Conservative unadulterated, had little faith in the march of civilization, still less in the progress mania. He believed everything about which a fuss was made to be a mistake. Did not see why people should cry up an age that had not improved the breed of horses, the flavour of wine, or—and he held to this—the actual condition of the people; his creed being that the law of equalization—which is the law of progress—must always neutralize any advantage gained. Higher wages, higher prices; hours taken from work, spent in public-houses—and so on. He condemned the modern system of public education, all the more loudly from knowing nothing about it; and at woman's suffrage he laughed till his sides ached, much to the indignation of half a

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party about him. "They would follow a Treherne wherever he led," was the conclusion to which he came. "Politics, like everything else, is to them, as to nine-tenths of mankind, a mere game of 'follow my leader.'" This to himself; but in public he spoke much and well, of the enlightenment of the age—the freedom of thought—the honest devotion to a principle, that makes the strength of the English government, and of its people. And saying this, he believed that he spoke from conviction, and so did his hearers.

The fact is that speech is not the interpretation of thought or feeling. The thoughts that rise unbidden, and are therefore your true, natural sentiments, are not those which flow from the lips, however honest or straightforward you may be. Words are under your control, and can be shaped to your will; thought is altogether beyond it, and governs you, not you it.

There were many things that Carlton

Treherne's natural instinct or prejudices said to him that he would not have repeated to his constituents. While talking much of the freedom that he knew to be the proudest boast of every true Englishman, he said nothing to them, as he did to himself, of the necessity of treating them as you would a high-spirited horse—giving them their head so long as you can with safety, then, when you see danger, holding them in with an iron grasp, that so they may recognize and submit to the master's hand another time.

Yet he was thoroughly in earnest. His sympathies were with mankind in general, taken collectively, rather than separately. He honestly believed that he understood as well as any man the spirit and necessities of the age; and in all that he did and meant to do he thought more of others than himself; of shining far less than of being useful. Some men there are born to be useful, rather than ornamental; and it was upon this simple power of usefulness,

which he possessed in no ordinary degree, that the Liberal candidate reckoned for success. What talents he had were of a solid, hardy, practical order. In whatever he undertook there was some practical end to be gained, and his very roughness of manner and imperious abruptness of tone were calculated to win confidence rather than popularity. He was lord and master wherever he appeared and in whatever he did; always ready with good advice, and with more substantial help, too, when needed. Whatever had for its object the bettering of the condition of man, beast, or the land that fed them, commanded his hearty sympathy and co-operation.

Of the two men, Colonel Beverley was, perhaps, the more popular. A superior may discuss with you sewage and drainage, crops and taxes, and you may be very glad to hear all he has to say on the subject, and still more glad to have your say out; but the impression left behind will hardly be as pleasing as that produced by a cheery nod

and smile, and laughing inquiry after your wife and pretty daughters, or—pretty wife and little ones. Carlton Treherne could not play popular; he was too much in earnest for that.

“I’ll tell you what it is,” the colonel said one day. “Treherne has stuff enough in him for the making of half a dozen ordinary men. There is nothing of which he is not capable. I never saw such a head for business! Why, within the last few years he has almost doubled the value of every farm on the estate. He is the first Treherne who ever thought it worth while to make a fortune instead of squandering one. I hear that he is paying off the mortgages, which must be pretty heavy, for all the Trehernes were reckless spendthrifts. But there never was such a fellow for bringing about practical results. There are those Works of his across the river: for years they were the plague of the late squire’s life, and could not be made to cover expenses; but he took them in hand, and has

converted them into a mine of wealth. I could never understand how he had brought it into such fine working order, until I found him there one day hard at work, hammering away as if for his life, the great drops standing upon his forehead; and old Mayne told me that there was not a stroke of work he had not tried and mastered. That's what comes of a Treherne being born a Hercules, contrary to all precedent. But he's a splendid fellow, and nothing of a Treherne about him. He's his mother all over!"

In those last words lay, perhaps, the secret of the colonel's affection for his political opponent. Katherine Treherne had been an early love of his; she might have had him instead of Guy Treherne. But the latter was her cousin, he had loved her longest, and was the better match of the two—for the rest she cared but little—so she had taken him. To console himself Captain Beverley had married, when in India, a pretty, bright little brunette, who

had made him a much pleasanter wife than Katherine Treherne would have done; but they say you never quite forget your first love.

CHAPTER II.

MANY months had passed since the night of the hospital ball, turned to such good account by Miss Graham for the display of her elegant London toilette, fine jewels, and yet finer shoulders. Nor had the display, she now verily believed, been in vain, little appreciative as the master of Treherne had then shown himself. That was just his way, she argued, and mattered little, after all. Many another girl might then, and often enough since, have been repelled by his cold indifference of manner ; but she was possessed of a wonderful tenacity of purpose. Give her an object worthy of her, and she would pursue it quietly, slowly, steadily, gaining ground at

every step. Her present object was to become mistress of Treherne, to secure to herself the woman's coveted and most natural end—a home; and at it she worked with a patience and perseverance that would have done credit to a mole or a beaver (an ant and a bee are creatures far too busy, bustling, and fussy to bear comparison with Sir John's daughter). Disturb her neat feminine arrangements in one direction, she would begin afresh as slowly, quietly, steadily, in another. She must build herself a home, she must secure to herself a proper establishment. This she had told her father many a time, and he quite agreed with her; nay, he did more than agree, he even condescended to help her, by giving his cousin, the squire, two or three as broad hints as one man can give another on so very delicate a subject. At the first of these hints the squire had opened his eyes slightly, and stared at the baronet in a manner that was more confusing than encouraging. At the second he

had given a short, amused laugh, and changed the conversation; at the third he faced round upon the speaker, and asked him, point-blank, with something of impatience in his look and tone, whether he was only hinting at his own wishes, or Miss Graham had empowered him to speak as he had done? When Sir John, rather taken aback, enlarged upon his own feelings as a devoted father, and those of his daughter as a modest young lady who had her preference, which she was quite ready openly to avow, should fortune favour her, he shrugged his shoulders, and laughed again; then, all at once growing serious, he confronted the baronet, saying, with a slow deliberation that was all the more hopeful from being rather business-like than lover-like—

“Evelyn is a very handsome girl. She has a remarkably fine complexion, and more than one quality that would be invaluable in a wife; a good temper, a good knowledge of household matters, and a manner that

would be imposing for every one but her husband," with a slightly sarcastic smile. "My mother was fond of her——" He broke off abruptly, and having reached the lodge gate, wished his companion good-bye, much to Sir John's disappointment. He had hoped to see matters brought more forward before they parted that day.

"Won't you come in?" he asked, in his most coaxing tone. "Evelyn will be disappointed if she hears that you got thus far and would not just step in to see her."

But Carlton Treherne shook his head and his cousin's hand, and walked home, pondering as he went.

It was many months since the night of the ball, and the day of storm that had succeeded it. His life since that time had been much what it had been before. He had avoided rather a certain oak, and wood, and the farm that lay beyond it. Mr. and Mrs. Lane, too, had complained more than once that they never now saw him; but every day having its self-allotted work, and

actual important interests, left him but little leisure for visiting or remembering. He had, however, found leisure to see much of his cousin Evelyn. Whether the meetings were contrived by himself or her, the result was the same—they were brought together. And as she was always very amiable, very smiling, very ladylike; as she never provoked him as another woman had done with her sharp tongue and restless feet; never shocked him with wild, original conceits; was never jealous, exacting, or, apparently, pushing; but moved quietly, spoke softly, was perfectly even, one interview finding her as the last had left her; it was but natural that he should take a certain pleasure in her society, which pleasure grew in time to be a habit, the strength of which he was more ready to magnify than depreciate. “My mother was fond of her,” he said to himself, as he sauntered slowly homeward. He was not a man of sentiment, very far from it, but he had been fond of his mother.

“She liked the girl,” he repeated, as, having gained his room, and lit his pipe, he sat staring thoughtfully at the picture on the wall, the picture before which the girl Rachel had stood, and to which she had looked up with moist eyes, and such a full, beating heart.

“She was always handsome, even as a child, and my mother wished me to marry her. Those two suited each other, I think, all the better for being so unlike; and as I have little time, and no inclination, for love-making, and shall be glad of a wife, as a public man, I may as well oblige the old gentleman, and my pretty cousin. She will suit me better than most women, and help me to lead a more regular, civilized life. She will do the receiving and visiting, and all that sort of thing, and look remarkably well as hostess, showing to better advantage as matron than maid. A calm, placid wife, the handsome mother of fine, healthy children. And she will be happy with me, too, I think, poor child,” with something of

graver, gentler thought. "I don't believe she could take anything really to heart, if she tried—so much the better! She will take life quietly, and allow me to do so. If she worries herself and me about anything, it will be about servants, for not a thought will she have beyond her home, of which she will be moderately proud—proud of the drawing-room furniture, the family jewels, the well-appointed equipage, in which year after year she will roll, changing little as time goes on; growing more portly—it lies in the family to get stout in middle age, though not to any alarming extent—but none the less handsome for that.

Having no further thoughts on the subject ready just then, he rose, stretched himself, then remembered that he had promised to see John Rawdon that evening.

His nearest way to the school-house lay across the park, down its slope to the giant oak, where he had spent so many idle hours the year before, and which he had avoided ever since, not caring to be haunted by the

face that looked out at him from among the low-lying branches—a face not fair and placid and stately, but one of which he had often said—half in anger, when haunted by it, radiant and dark and lovable—that in middle age it would be almost ugly. Take the light from the great eyes, the dew from the thin, sensitive lips, the glitter from the teeth, above which the gum showed pink as coral—take the warm red blood, that came and went so bewitchingly, from the small, sallow face—and what would be left?

Often enough had he thus tried to reason himself into caring less for the girl's face. He did not reason now, he only turned from the tree where they had sat and been happy together; and on the low, heavy brow there was a line of pain.

His calm, clear judgment could reason away the vision, but still it returned every now and then, unbidden and most unwelcome. The vision of the child who had laughed at him, teased him, kissed him, maddened him. Who had enticed

him into making her an offer, then got up a scene, sworn never to marry him, and gone off, telling him, by way of farewell, that no other woman would ever love him half as well?

School was just out as he passed through the village, and he met John Rawdon at the gate.

The schoolmaster had had a hard time of it since the day when, driven to desperation, he had, in the presence of the whole school, defied, and finally turned out, that terror of all weak minds, his own included, Jim Bates, the village bully. It had been a desperate deed, and not one of which he would ever care to boast. Gladly would he have had it forgotten; but it was not likely Jim would forget that the man he had called a coward, at whose infirmities he had jeered, despising them and him, had seized him, as a mastiff might a rat, bending him to his will, and making of him a public example in the sight of the school-fellows he had for years bullied with im-

punity. What had been his feelings as he stood without in the playground, his teeth chattering with mingled surprise, rage, and fear, he would never forget.

His father, as great a bully as himself, sided with him, to spite the master. *He* might lay the cart-whip over the boy's shoulders, but no one else should touch him. Upon this subject he had much to say, and others following his example, John Rawdon got more talked about than would have been agreeable to his feelings had he known it. Perhaps he did know it in part, though too proud and reserved to take any notice of the spirit of opposition that was abroad against him, for it was generally remarked, eliciting more contempt than pity, that the master was growing thinner and more weakly-looking day by day.

Visiting among his tenants, the squire had heard more than one complaint of the mismanagement of the school and inefficiency of the master. (Trust an Englishman for complaining if he gets the chance.)

Mr. Rawdon might be a fine enough scholar, they admitted, and sharp at book-learning—and he used fine long words, only, as he never got them out properly, they were not of much use to any one but himself; or his learning either, which was all about things that no one could understand—but he was not fit to manage the school.

The squire's greeting of the schoolmaster was all the more cordial for the feeling of impatience that had risen up in his heart against the man and his weakness.

“Can I have a word with you, Rawdon? Are you going home?”

“I was going up to the almshouses to see old Price. I like to have a chat with him whenever I can spare the time. It gives him pleasure.”

Old Price had at one time been schoolmaster in a neighbouring village, but nearly blind, and utterly destitute, had found a comfortable berth in one of the model almshouses before mentioned. The squire, glad

to have secured so deserving an object of charity, visited him, as he did the other inmates, regularly, as a matter of duty, seeing only in him a tiresome, pedantic old fellow, who had all the talk to himself, took gifts and benefits as his due, and seemed impressed with nothing but the sense of his own importance. To John Rawdon he was more sympathetic. Alone, destitute, blind, a scholar, like himself, he respected the attainments that were so inferior to his own, honoured the white, bowed head over which had passed so many storms, and pitying the darkened vision, to which nothing was left but memory, could be indulgent to his pedantries and tiresome peculiarities. "It is sadder to be blind than lame," he would say to himself, as he looked at the old man, who lived, as he did, in the past. "When he discusses politics, or the Latin authors, he forgets the present, and is happy." Feeling this, John spent many an hour with the ex-schoolmaster. Had he spent half as many

in the comfortable farms and shops of the village, had he taken as much trouble to secure the good-will of those, whose influence would make them serviceable as friends and formidable as enemies, as he did to cheer the blind old pauper, he might have been as popular as he was the reverse.

The squire accompanied him part of the way, and gave him much good advice, to which he listened in silent admiration. How clever his patron was! How well he spoke! But how little he understood the difficulties of his position! He did not utter a word in his own defence. How could he? The squire was right, and so was the village; he was unfit for his post. But, then, old Stephen had to be fed, and the little wife; and incapable though he was, sickly, a cripple, and a *coward*, they had no one else, better and stronger, to work for them.

As the squire turned to go John Rawdon gave a sigh so deep as to be almost a

groan, and his thoughts for the rest of the walk were anything but pleasant company. Indeed, they more than half frightened him. If he were to lose his situation, what would become of him? What hope lay for him beyond the bare schoolroom walls? Once he had been ambitious; but now faith in himself was dead. What was a little extra book-learning when weighed in the balance with so many physical and moral defects? Old Price, a man of education, like himself, had come to beggary and an almshouse. Why should he not share the same fate? If they turned him out, what would be left to him but starvation?—starvation for himself and grandfather, and Agatha, and their unborn child.

While these and many other anxious thoughts crowded in upon him, Agatha sat at their parlour window, which looked out upon the garden, and hummed softly to herself as she bent over her work. At any hour of the afternoon she might be seen there, always busy and alone; for sur-

rounded though she was by women, wives and mothers, of whose sympathy she would often have been glad, she was as utterly friendless as her husband. He was proud and unsociable, and shrank from any closer contact with the farmers and tradespeople around than was absolutely necessary, looking miserably awkward and out-of-place in their comfortable homes; and as you are not liked for what you *are*, but for what you are in your relation with others, the little wife, though pretty, and soft, and unassuming, had to bear the burden of the peasant-born husband's unpopularity.

During the first years of their marriage, living only for the one, his society and love had been all she either asked or cared for. It was such perfect happiness to be alone—with him. But by-and-by, when sickness came; when danger had succeeded long weeks of prostration; when solitude was saddened by the memory of two little white faces that had lain against her bosom, of two little white coffins that had passed out

of the door, she did long sometimes, with tears, and almost broken-hearted, for some kindly soul to turn to—for some woman, a mother, like herself, to whom she could talk comfortingly of her little ones, and the void they had left in her life.

She had never, perhaps, fully realized her own loneliness, or the woman's natural craving for sympathy, until one day, about a year before, when, feeling very weak and dull, a neighbour, wife of one of the smaller farmers, had dropped in unexpectedly, about a matter of business ; and struck by her fragile appearance, and the wistful pleading of her eyes, had sat herself down comfortably beside her, and gently patting her hand, had spoken a few rough words of hope and comfort. Then Agatha had fairly given way, and, bending her face down upon the coarse hand that had touched hers in pity, had cried as if her heart would break. And the visitor gone, she had still wept on, stretching out her arms as if for the common help and

sympathy which so few are altogether without.

How gladly after that would she have welcomed the visit of any woman, however simple, who could feel for and understand her! How eagerly would she have welcomed any voice, however rough and uneducated, that would speak words of strength and hope! But her husband was unpopular, and she was a lady born, and not one of *them*—and nobody came near her.

The two wee graves in the Didford cemetery were green, the flowers upon them in full bloom, for it was summer time, and Agatha sat at the open parlour window, waiting for her husband's return, and singing softly to herself as she bent over her work—not the merry songs of her girlhood, or the love-ballads she had sung to John of an evening when they were first married, but solemn hymns and chants she had brought back with her from church, as if thereby to consecrate the white baby garments at which she sewed with such busy

fingers—the garments in the like of which made for the living child, the dead had already twice been laid to rest in its tiny coffin—flowers on its breast beneath the folded hands, the mother's kiss upon its lips, the mother's tears with the baptismal cross upon its forehead.

CHAPTER III.

JIM BATES having set himself long since, and without provocation, the pleasant and profitable task of making life a burden to the lame schoolmaster, was not likely to be turned from his purpose by the rough treatment he had received at his hands. He no longer, it is true, openly defied and insulted him—he dare not; for, strange to say, he was now afraid of him, more afraid of the iron grip of the thin, nervous hand, than of the heavy weight of his father's cart-whip. But of most of the mischief and underhand doings that went on in the school, he was the ingenious instigator; and even when Farmer Bates, sulky and resentful, removed him from the school, saying, with surly in-

justice, that as Mr. Rawdon had a grudge against the lad, it was as well he should keep away, he lost no opportunity of secretly spiting him and undermining his influence.

One day the farmer paid the schoolmaster a visit. It was a most unusual and unexpected honour; moreover, his manner was quite friendly and familiar. He began by kind inquiries after Mrs. Rawdon, grinning and winking until the beautiful blue eyes filled with an uneasy, troubled look; and adding, by way of a pleasant winding up, that "She looked sadly enough, poor thing! just as unfit to be about as if she were already in her grave."

Then came the real purport of his visit. His boy Jim had the offer of a situation in a neighbouring town, where the work was not above his very limited capacities, and where he would at once be off his father's hands. But to secure it, a character must be got from the rector or schoolmaster. The former had been first applied to, and

got out of it, refusing shortly enough—not so much because of any ill he had heard of the boy, as because his father was not by any means a regular attendant at church, and had more than once, in his dogged obstinacy, opposed certain measures that he, the rector, had at heart. When asked, therefore, for his good word, he had replied that he knew nothing and could say nothing—Mr. Rawdon was the proper person to be applied to. So the farmer paid the schoolmaster a visit, laid the case before him, took his acquiescence as a matter of course, though he had not said a word, and concluded, as he rose to leave—

“And so we may rely upon your giving our Jim as good a character as you can?”

“As I can, consistently with truth and honesty,” answered John Rawdon, very gently.

Farmer Bates, struck by the tone rather than the words, and getting more hot and uncomfortable the longer he remained in the presence of the man he disliked, and of

whom he expected a favour, was fain to be content and be off.

“Yes, yes, of course. So that’s settled. Nothing like regular work for steadying young men nowadays. The fact is, Mr. Rawdon, they learn too much and think too much”—here the schoolmaster could not suppress a smile—“and that gets them into idle, mischievous ways; but steady work will soon set all to rights.”

It was the first time Farmer Bates had allowed that there was anything to set right, but somehow the presence of the schoolmaster made him alter his tone somewhat; and it must evidently have confused his ideas, or he would hardly have spoken so honestly.

A day or two afterwards John Rawdon was formally applied to for the character of James Bates, candidate for the offered situation; a particular stress being laid upon honesty, conscientiousness, habits of industry. With the letter in his hand, he repaired to the farm, bearding the lion in

his den, seeking him out in the dreaded depths of the "Missus's parlour," and telling him steadily—his look meeting his, with an effort, though—that he could not answer for Jim's honesty, truth, or conscientiousness. It is true, he felt rather uncomfortable the while, and there was a quiver about his lips as he spoke, his voice lower and more gentle even than usual; seeing which signs of nervous depression, Farmer Bates at once squared himself out, and assumed his most bullying tone. Finding, however, that that did not further his cause, or, rather, the cause of Jim, he altered it to one altogether confidential; made of it a sort of personal obligation which would, he believed, be flattering to the poor schoolmaster's feelings—hoped he could trust him, felt sure that he was above anything like private spite. The boy, he condescendingly allowed, might have been troublesome as a scholar; but who would have the heart to do him an injury for a little extra roughness and bluntness of

speech, etc., etc.? To this he added something else intended both as a threat and bribe; and then—his companion fairly silenced by the immense bulk of the man who, seated before him, seemed to be consuming all the oxygen of the very limited space, and preventing the proper circulation of air, until free breathing was an impossibility—by the big importance of his words, and the gruff, ogre-like tone in which they were uttered, the farmer, convinced that his cause was gained, and Jim's character as good as got, waxed quite playful; slapped Mr. Rawdon on the knee, asked him to have a taste of his best home-brewed, and brought out some cigars, a particular mark of respect and consideration.

John Rawdon declined both cigar and ale, but accepted, not without hesitation, the large coarse hand so ostentatiously thrust forth, and the deep thunderings of the ogre voice deafening and confusing him, he found himself outside the farm gates alone, and with the very uncomfortable convic-

tion that something was still expected of him.

“No, no, it would never do,” he said, as he lifted the hat from his heated brows, as he always did in moments of excitement or troubled thought, and shook back the loose auburn curls with a sort of helpless impatience. “It would be mean, dishonourable, a lie! I know what he is. His employer would trust him, and he must not be trusted—he *shall* not, through *me*.”

A pause, his look growing more and more troubled.

“It would never do. No, no—if I did it it would not be pity or charity, but—— He said I was a coward. It would be the action of one. He may harm me—he will, I know; he can, and he will. He can get me turned out. They will take his word for it that I am unfit for my post. It can’t be helped,” with a heavy, anxious sigh. “He’ll do his worst; but Mr. Hale appeals to me as a man of honour and a gentleman. The boy is not to be trusted; there’s

nothing of which he is not capable. I can't betray an honest man's confidence. I won't ! ”

Anxious thoughts thus crowding in upon him thick and fast, he had wearily ascended the hill, and was turning down the lane towards home, when the sound of a familiar voice, its tones hoarse and broken, made him start and stop short.

“ Oh, grandfather—*again!* ” he cried, speaking unconsciously aloud in his shame and grief.

Not many yards from where he stood there was a wayside inn, screened from sight, however, by a row of trees. Before it had congregated some half a dozen men, and among them, his height, bent though he now was, towering high above the rest, was Stephen Rawdon. They were engaged in an angry altercation, and his voice, deeper and more sonorous than theirs, was making itself heard, to his own shame and the amusement of a big, red-faced carter—who, the only sober one among them, was watch-

ing with a broad delighted grin the drunken frenzy of a very old man—two or three boys, and a couple of fellows like himself, in the full vigour of physical and mental strength. From words they had got to blows, for a thin streak of blood was slowly trickling from the old man's temples down his wrinkled cheek, staining as it lost itself in the magnificent white beard that lay over his broad breast.

His aggressor was a heavy, thickset youth, who could have been his grandson in point of age. "Come on, then—you old fool!" he cried, doubling his fists and preparing for a rush at the stalwart octogenarian, who made no attempt whatever to defend himself; and not one of the drunken company, not the big, sober carter, leaning quietly on his heavy whip, put forth a hand to save the white head from that murderous fist. An outstretched hand did, however, descend upon it, striking it aside—a clenched hand, the iron strength of which had once before made itself felt.

With a howl of mingled rage and pain the thickset youth turned, and the blow aimed at the grandfather was received in a mitigated form by the grandson, who at once placed himself before the giant veteran to shield, though he could not by any means cover him.

So sudden and unexpected had been the interruption that its sobering effect was instantaneous. All fell back, leaving the two together and apart.

Bareheaded still, his hand still firmly clenched, his whole frame shaken with passion, John Rawdon stood awhile longer on the defensive, the blue, reproachful eyes travelling slowly from one red-heated face to another. When they reached that of the carter, still watching the scene with amused curiosity, their expression changed. He, at least, was not drunk, yet he had seen the old man attacked, and would have seen him struck to the ground without interfering. The rest were hardly more responsible for their actions than the wretched old

man himself; but the carter was, and therefore it was a shame and disgrace to him that he had not interfered, and so John Rawdon told him with flashing eyes, in pretty plain terms, and with a reckless disregard of the man's size, his sullen looks, and the formidable weight of the weapon that lay beneath his hand.

“Such an old man, so utterly defenceless amongst you all, how could you look on and not take pity on him?”

These were his concluding words, his voice softening and vibrating. “Come along grandfather,” and he turned to go, the big carter, whether intentionally or not, he could hardly himself have said, advancing leisurely a step or two so that his person covered their retreat; a not unnecessary precaution, perhaps, as a great deal of noise and confusion followed their departure.

Taking no heed of this, not once looking round, the old, shaking hand still tightly clasped in his, John Rawdon turned down the lane that led towards home.

For awhile they walked on in silence. The blood was still slowly trickling from the sunken temples down into the white beard, staining it more and more, and giving rather a ghastly look to the whole face drooping so dejectedly forward upon his breast. It was a dejected figure altogether, that of the gaunt old man, passively submitting to be led along by the hand like a little child, down the cool, sunshiny lane, where the branches meeting overhead threw, as they swayed softly to the breeze, a confusion of dancing light and shadow across their path; where the birds twittered and chirped and piped, their songs and the ceaseless gurgling of a brook the only living sounds, when the broken hubbub from the inn had died away.

It was not until they had reached a spot where the brook, crossing the path, had so increased in size and importance as to have stepping-stones at the one end and a plank at the other, that the schoolmaster stopped and looked up wistfully into the old man's

face. For the first time he noticed the blood, its pallor, its shame-stricken, woe-begone expression.

“Oh, grandfather—*again!*” he said, not angrily, but with something of reproach; it was dreadful to fall so low.

“I’m bleeding, Johnny,” in a very piteous tone, “and—I’m so tired.”

“Then sit down and rest a bit, and I’ll just wet my handkerchief and wipe away the blood; it will cool you, too. You’ll be all right after a while.” And John smiled as he caught an answering look of intelligence in the dim eyes, and saw him stretch his gaunt length on the pretty, flowering bank, a painful contrast to the life and freshness and beauty of all around. But that did not strike the schoolmaster just then, lover of harmony though he was.

It was of quite other things he was thinking as, kneeling by the brook, he dipped into it his handkerchief. How many years had passed, how much had happened, since he had knelt beside it last! It was not with

his manhood, but with his childhood and its many memories it was associated. What boy has not made a friend and companion of the bit of water that lay nearest home? Vividly, as if it had been but yesterday, he recalled a certain day when he and his grandfather had walked down that same lane together; the songs of the birds, the gurgling of the brook, the lights and shadows—all the same. But they two, how different! Hand in hand they had walked as now—the protector and the protected, the weak and the strong; the one in the full glory of unimpaired health and vigour, such health and vigour as belonged to the whole Rawdon race until there had come that little, lame, sickly, helpless child to disgrace it, to cling to the man's breast, or to one strong finger, feeling nowhere else so safe.

But it was of a certain day he was thinking, when having, for a wonder, let go the big finger, he had tumbled down and hurt himself, and cried and howled, with terror more than with pain, at sight of the blood

that trickled from his forehead down on to his holland pinafore—weak, miserable little coward that he was, even then! How well he remembered it all, and how grandfather had knelt down just where he was kneeling now, and dipped in his handkerchief—not by any means such a fine one as he held—for it was the little wife's one pride that he should have everything nice and dainty, she being so proud of him and all that belonged to him—but a great, spotted, cotton square such as he still used, and which had served quite as well as the finest cambric to wipe away the blood that had frightened the sickly child. The old man's memory was getting very bad and he had forgotten many things, this among the rest, no doubt; but his grandson had not, nor how he had afterwards been carried ever so high and ever so far on the broad shoulder that made such a comfortable seat, that he might look into the pretty nests and *forget*. There was the hedge and the pretty nests, the brook, the light and shadow, all the

same. But they two, how changed! It was the strong man now who was helpless and needed care and looking after, and got it, too. Very natural and right, but very sad; so John Rawdon thought, and there was something swelling at his heart and gathering in his eyes that prevented his seeing quite clearly the handkerchief, in the corner of which the little wife had so neatly embroidered his initials. "Poor old grandfather! he mustn't see that I am grieved. I must try to make *him forget*."

So he returned to the dejected figure stretched along the bank, the haggard old face supported on the mighty but now useless hand, the blood still trickling, but more slowly. And as he wiped it away and smoothed back the grey, loose hair, hanging damp and forlorn over his forehead, he talked of his visit to the farmer, of Agatha, and little Willie, who had promised to call in and taste Mrs. Rawdon's marmalade.

"Little Willie? Ay, ay—he's a knowing chap!" nodded the old fellow, brightening

up a bit. "It's your young days over again, Johnny, as I sometimes say to him. You were always for peeping, and peering, and asking."

"Many's the walk we used to take together down this lane—eh, grandad?"

"Ay, ay. It was here," with a chuckle, "you found the cracked egg, and made me climb the tree to put it back into the nest that the bird might lay it again all right. Willie knows better than that; but you were always a queer little chap, and——"

"You spoilt me, grandfather—you know you did." And seated at the old man's side, the better to comfort him, he leant the brown curly head with a scarce conscious, but once so familiar movement, towards the breast that had so often sheltered it, and wished, for the space of one heavy heart-throb, that he could go back, resume his weakness, give the old man back his strength, be a child once more, the stern, cruel battle of life unfought, its wearing cares and anxieties unknown, the future

before him, his present that one great, strong, faithful, simple love that had satisfied him once. Even the remembrance of it had done him good, strengthening and refreshing him.

“Come, grandfather, we’re both rested now ; and Agatha and Willie will be waiting tea for us.”

It was not Agatha or Willie, however, whom the schoolmaster found awaiting him in the bright little parlour, but another visitor, and a most unwelcome one.

CHAPTER IV.

No sooner had Mr. Rawdon made his exit through the farm gate than Mrs. Bates, the briskest and most inquisitive of females, hurried out to know why he had called, and all about it. "Was it about Jim?"

"Course it was—what else should it be?" growled the farmer, who, notwithstanding his gruff and far from encouraging tone, was glad enough of an opportunity of talking the matter over.

"Has he given the character?"

"No," with a deeper growl and scowl and forward stride that said plainer than words, "Hold your tongue and be off!" and that would have intimidated any less strong-minded individual. But Mrs. Bates was

strong-minded, and knew her man, and that she would get all out of him if she only gave him time, and let him go to work his own way. So she kept up, and followed him into the cow-byre, where he stood, his elbows squared out, apparently quite oblivious of her presence.

“I knew it could be no good that had brought him here.”

“Whoo, Daisy, old girl!” The farmer had moved a step nearer to the cow, and further from his wife.

“He’ll just lose our Jim the situation.”

“Will he?” with a sneer. “Much you know about it,” scornfully.

“Yes, he will,” with dogged persistence, for she knew her man, and how to rouse him.

“Then I tell you he won’t,” in a voice of thunder. “He daren’t!”

“Daren’t! Why not, I should like to know? Who’s to prevent him?”

“I!” with a very big look. “I can turn him out of his place or keep him in

it, and so I told him, and a pretty face he made. Not another word about duty or the *honour* of a *gentleman* after that. Ha, ha!"

"Well, to be sure!" with feigned or genuine admiration.

The British lion having been thus induced to unbosom himself, his consort had it all her own way. Much more was said, by her, and in conclusion—

"Get the letter written and sent, for he'll sneak out of it if he can. He's a grudge against the boy, and will do him an ill turn yet if you don't look sharp."

And the farmer did look sharp accordingly, and five minutes later sallied forth, armed with his stick, Jove's thunder on his brow, and in his pocket an envelope containing a folded sheet of note-paper, to pay the schoolmaster another friendly visit.

And now we know who awaited John Rawdon in the bright little parlour.

Farmer Bates, more than ever convinced, by the master's scared look, of the effect

produced by certain words of his, drew forth at once the sheet of note-paper. "Mrs. Bates was driving the chaise into B——, on Saturday, and wished, mother-like, to see Mr. Hale herself, about the boy; so if Mr. Rawdon would just write the character, he would post it that evening, so as to make all square before she went. And if your good word settles this little matter for us, why, you know what I told you, master; and I'm a man of my word. Give and take; that's fair and honest, and easy done."

Yes, *if fair and honest*, easy enough; a few lines, and the inveterate antagonist would be converted into a friend and well-wisher; the black sheep of the village, who had so long been the terror and torment of the lame schoolmaster's life, would be comfortably got rid of, despatched to a distant town, his fatal influence and cruelty and spite no longer to be dreaded; and the dogged support of the farmer, who never did things by halves, once secured, another

haunting fear would be laid at rest, the fear of losing his place.

Perhaps had he been in a calmer frame of mind he would have seen all these advantages more clearly; as it was, he only felt very nervous and anxious for the interview to be over. The blow, too, that he had received was beginning to tell upon him, making him faint and giddy. The bulky form before him, the white paper lying on the table which separated them, appeared and vanished in a strange, uncomfortable manner. He raised his hand to his head, but let it drop. Now was not the time to give way. Jim's father had misunderstood him. He must speak, and plainly; there might be no mistake this time.

"Well, master, here's the paper. Just a line, you know, and the thing's done." He pushed over the sheet to the other side of the table.

John Rawdon shrank back involuntarily. He was afraid of the man before him, of his looks, his voice, the violence of his lan-

guage, the coarse, brutal oath that was so often on his lips.

“It’s just the keeping or losing of your place, and that you know as well as I do.”

Again John Rawdon’s hand went up to his head, for the pain and the faintness were growing more than he could bear. With a great effort he moistened his parched lips, and farmer and paper having quite disappeared behind the black mist that seemed to stretch between him and them, he did contrive to speak, and so plainly, that there could be no mistake. And then, the mist clearing suddenly away, he once more saw the farmer, and heard him, too—his oaths, and threats, and curses; the clenched fist descending with a loud, murderous crash upon the table that alone separated them. At that table he clutched—for the pain and the faintness were now quite intolerable—but he missed his hold, and with a gasp, as if for breath, dropped back into the chair from which he had previously risen.

The last sound he caught before he quite lost his senses was the loud, jeering laugh that told him plainly enough what Farmer Bates thought of him, and his sneaking way of getting rid of the man he had offended.

CHAPTER V.

As no character was forthcoming, Jim lost the situation. For this he cared but little, work, no matter of what kind, not being to his taste ; but his parents, who were almost as anxious as was the schoolmaster to get rid of him, were furious. A wrong had been done them, and there was nothing more grateful to Farmer Bates' feelings than to have a real big grievance over which he could wax loud and abusive. All that could be said on the subject he said. It was not long, therefore, before all Didford had heard his version of the story ; and as the schoolmaster said nothing, he got all the blame, and the farmer all the sympathy.

From being disliked, poor John was now

regarded as a suspicious and dangerous character, who should, in justice to themselves, be got rid of.

People in the rank of life to which he belonged, have less control over their feelings than those in a higher rank. They do not smile where they would frown, or flatter where they would revile. As a rule, they say what they mean plainly, with little regard to the feelings of friend or foe. They did so in this instance, and the schoolmaster was made to feel his growing unpopularity in more ways than one. "He was not one of them," they argued, "and never had been. He would not be sociable, or meet any friendly advances. He could not even look his neighbours in the face like an honest man. His conduct to the boy Bates was in keeping with the rest. If he could do any one of them an ill turn he would. But they would be beforehand with him, and get him turned out. There was Smith, master of Leighton village school. He *was* a man! Smart, active, fluent, and worth ten such

men as John Rawdon. If he had not all the dead languages, which no one cared about, at the tip of his fingers, he could at least get his own to the tip of his tongue. And he could play the violin, and sing a song with the best of them, and was good company, and unmarried, and quite ready to bring himself and his available talents to Didford so soon as its present master should have been disposed of."

The plot thickened day by day, nor was its victim left long in ignorance of its workings. Not Job himself was more ruthlessly set upon by his friends; for even his open enemies were not as pitiless in their persecutions as those who, in a hard, lukewarm sort of way, styled themselves his friends. He could not pass beyond the shelter of his own garden-gate without being fallen upon by one or more of them. The shy pride and reserve that had made for him so many enemies, could not save him from their officious persecutions. "What would become of him when he was turned out?

There was the almshouse for old Stephen, if the squire would kindly overlook the past and admit him. But John himself, what would become of him—and poor Mrs. Rawdon? Well, it was a pity, to be sure, and just his ruin. But why had he not obliged Farmer Bates in the matter of a character? It was his business to keep well with the neighbours, and not have them all turn against him.”

Unhappy victim! And so broken was he in spirit that he did not even turn upon his tormentors as did Job, but listened to all in silence, or with a few humble words, over which he stammered confusedly in his shame and despair.

No fresh humiliation could surprise him after that one word he had overheard. The contempt for him so openly expressed was quite natural and not a thing to be resented; but when the rough words that were not always meant in unkindness, but which made him wince and cower as under a sharp blow, had ceased to ring in his ears,

he would sink his head in his shoulders, which had contracted quite a stoop of late, and limp off as fast as his unfortunate lameness would allow.

It was long before Mrs. Rawdon was made acquainted with the ruin that stared them in the face. Her husband could not now speak of his wrongs even to her. Troubles and ruin, when they came, she must share with him, as his wife—but not his shame; that, for the love she bore him, and the faith she still had in him, he must keep to himself. The one fatal word that had fallen as a blight upon his life, robbing it of every hope in the future and joy in the past, had even raised a barrier between him and the little wife, who still believed in him, spite of all. He could not bear to look into the pretty, gentle face, and receive the soft, passionate caresses that were given, not to the man as he was, but as she, in her blind folly, believed him to be. Poor little wife! she saw the change in her idol, but was very far from guessing at the cause. She

felt that they were no longer to each other all they had once been—that something had come between them; but she never asked him, though she often asked herself, what the *something* was.

One evening she sat, as usual, at the parlour window, making the most of the fading light, for she was anxious to finish the wee bit of work, over which she had been busy all the afternoon, before laying it aside.

She was not alone in the room—though as silent as if she were—for John sat at the table, apparently engrossed in a book, and she never disturbed him, like a good little wife, when he was busy.

From time to time she would steal a look at his face, and then breathe a sigh—the face was so careworn; the hand upon which it leant wearily, so thin, so wasted. It was dreadful to see him suffer without the power to comfort—and no word, or caress even, of hers could comfort him now.

The tiniest of gussets calling for par-

ticular and undivided attention, some minutes elapsed without her looking up; but it was put in at last, she had finished her task, and holding it up, contemplated it awhile, her head a little on one side, with something of matronly pride. She could not see to do anything more until the lamp should be lit; and she was glad of it, for her eyes ached, and her fingers too. Would John look up from the book he could no longer read, and talk to her? She hoped so. It was so much less sad to have him talking to her, than to watch him sitting there so white and still, his head drooping so despondently forward upon his hand; and lately he would sit thus for hours.

His eyes were still fixed upon the open page, but something was gathering in them that prevented his distinguishing the characters. Agatha's heart stood still. She saw two great tears roll slowly and heavily down the wasted cheeks on to the book before him. He was grieving bitterly, secretly, without any thought of turning

to her for comfort. How dreadful it seemed!

Her work dropped unnoticed to the floor, and she crept softly to his side amid the twilight shadows. Before he was aware of her presence, so lost was he in bitter thoughts, her arms had stolen around his neck, and her cheek was laid against his.

“You have some secret trouble that you are keeping from me. I ought to know it. Tell me what it is, John.”

She should not have spoken so, or taken any notice of the momentary weakness. The two tears wrung from him by extreme bitterness of soul would not have been followed by any more; but the passionate clasp of the woman's arms, her soft words and caresses were more than he could bear, and he broke down altogether. It was mean and cowardly, but he could not help it! She was his wife, and she loved him, spite of all. The blow, when it fell, as fall it might at any moment, must crush her as well as him. To spare her, he had for

months borne, in silence, the burden of a haunting care; but she must know the worst soon enough now, and it might be as well for them to face it together, as man and wife.

Agatha was at first far too indignant to allow the possibility of her hero being ignominiously "turned out." For years her proud regret had been that he should have contented himself with so mean a post, and wasted his superior talents on the village boors. But an infatuation, however obstinately persisted in, won't alter hard facts; and she had to be convinced at last, even against her will. One certain hope was left them, however; Squire Treherne would use his influence to keep John in his situation, and his will was all-powerful!

"He has always been so good to us," she added, confidently. "He was so sorry for us when baby died—he told me so; and he was so kind when I was ill, and when—— But here she broke off, nestling closer, and laying her soft cheek against the poor,

wasted hand that had been so tender in sickness to soothe and comfort, longing in her turn to comfort him and give him hope.

At the first mention of the name of Treherne, John had given a convulsive start; then he said, hurriedly, as if to get rid of a painful subject—

“Mr. Treherne is in London.”

He did not add, as he might have done, that even threatened starvation was a thought less hard to face than that of applying to the man whose patronage had placed him in his situation, and begging him to keep him in it by force.

“But he returns this evening,” persisted Agatha, who was far from guessing his thoughts, and who, having long since overcome all shyness in the presence of the big, stern, generous man who had often befriended them, would rather have applied to him in their trouble than any one else.

There was a long, oppressive silence;

then, shrinking away from her encircling arm, he rose.

“ You are right, dear. I will go to Mr. Treherne. For your sake, and that of grandfather, and the child who may be born to us, I will beg him to keep me in my situation—to use his influence to prevent their turning me out. He has done so much for us already, that a benefit, more or less, is hardly worth a scruple.” This he said in a slow, quiet tone, and turned to go.

“ Where are you going, John ? ”

“ Grandfather is in the garden ; I think I will go to him.”

She had laid a detaining hand upon his arm, but let it drop. “ They will be better together,” she said to herself, not without a pang. “ The old man will not talk to John of his trouble, but of the flowers, and of things that happened long ago. He can often comfort him when I cannot.” Returning to the window, she picked up the pretty robe over which she had been so

busy, and carried it upstairs. On the threshold of the room she paused, and looked round—on the empty bed, the bed in which so much suffering had been borne; so many long, lonely hours watched through; so many secret tears wept out; in which so much of love, and sorrow, and rapture, had mingled with her dreams. Did they really mean to turn them out of their home?—the home to which John had brought her as his wife, and which, so bright and gay, just fresh from the builder's and painter's hands, had seemed to her a very paradise, when contrasted with the big bare rectory schoolroom. It was not quite in that light she regarded it now. She had learnt from bitter experience that even a model cottage can have its drawbacks—doors that creak, but will not close; windows that shake, but will not open; pipes that are always out of repair; an oven that seldom condescends to heat; and a parlour chimney that often smokes without burning, but not so often burns without smoking.

Notwithstanding all drawbacks, however, it was her home, where she would have been quite happy, had not fate, in the shape of Jim Bates, sickness, and two tiny coffins, slipped between her and happiness. And they spoke of turning them out !

CHAPTER VI.

CARLTON TREHERNE had been much from home lately. It was the height of the London season, and certain interests had taken him up to town, and kept him there, longer than usual. All fancied they knew what was the particular interest that kept him so long away. The Grahams were in London, going through a daily round of dissipation with unflagging energy; and what more natural than that Squire Treherne, being engaged to Miss Graham, should follow and remain near her?

When a woman goes systematically to work, without impulse or passion, to gain an object, she seldom fails of success. Evelyn's object had been gained; her

scheming was at an end. She owned, with much self-complacency, that she could not have done better for herself, and received with placid satisfaction the congratulations that poured in upon her from all sides. She was not elated, but serenely content. She had never had but one object in her life—to make a suitable match; and now she was engaged—to Carlton Treherne, her cousin, whom she had known all her life. He was a very fine fellow, and Treherne Park was a very fine place. Her husband would be M.P., and one of the richest men in the county. All her cousins envied her. And papa had promised her a very handsome *trousseau*, as a reward for having so well managed her affairs as to rid him of her in an easy, satisfactory manner.

Carlton Treherne, though as cordially congratulated by his friends as was Evelyn by hers, was far from being as much envied by them. Is it that handsome women are so common, or eligible matches so rare?

Sir Ralph Randal, when he heard of the

engagement, pitied his friend as the victim of a matrimonial plot. Fair, stout young women were not to his liking; and having found Miss Graham rather a dull, heavy partner in a valse, he wondered how any one could take her as a partner for life.

Fortunately, tastes differ. A man marries to please himself, not his friends; and Carlton Treherne was not the one, having made a choice, to repent of it. He had for years been fond of his cousin, and proud of her too. They had been intimate as only cousins can be. He knew her, or thought he did, thoroughly; had weighed her capabilities, and decided in her favour. When, therefore, to the baronet's fourth time of asking he had said "Yes," he very soon reconciled himself to the thought of her as his wife, and mistress of Treherne, and grew fonder of her from the fact that she belonged to him. He was in no hurry for the marriage, however, and it was his political rather than matrimonial prospects that kept him in town.

The election gained—and every day heightened his chances of success—he would enter upon a new phase in his useful, energetic life, and one for which he believed himself eminently fitted. Full of vigorous life and vitality, he could not do things by halves. All his thoughts and aims now tended in one direction. The life of the great city interested him as it had never done before. He was to be seen in most political circles, and was warmly welcomed by all the leading men of his party. Politicians, like every other body of men, are glad to enlist in their ranks the “healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Squire Treherne was all three, and was much made of, accordingly, by those who saw in the powerful intellect, mighty presence, and ample means, the elements of future usefulness. He might be valuable as an auxiliary.

Another thing which was in his favour, by adding to his importance, was his cousinship to a certain old Cabinet Minister, to whom his practical common sense and

knowledge of business had once been of service. Making one of a shooting party, invited down to his country seat, he had given him many a valuable hint as to the management of a hitherto mismanaged property; had detected at one keen, all-seeing glance the incompetency and rascality of a trusted steward, and clearly demonstrated the possibility of doubling the value of the heretofore neglected acres. Some extra hundreds in the old nobleman's pocket! Was not the man who had brought about so practical a result worthy of countenance?

Whatever time Carlton Treherne could spare from politics he devoted to Evelyn, who, not being of a jealous or exacting nature, made the most of her lover when he came, receiving him with soft words of welcome, and a pleased smile that sufficiently proved how glad she was to see him.

"Why," argued the girl, "should she tease him with complaints or sulky looks? He had done all that she expected of him, and her object gained, she was grateful. If

he were not so busy, she would be glad to see more of him, preferring, naturally, his society to that of any other person ; but in the height of the London season, and with a brilliant match in prospect, she could not feel dissatisfied or dull."

With praiseworthy conscientiousness she went through her daily round of duties, paying visits and receiving them ; shopping and dressing. She never failed to make her appearance in the park at the fashionable hour, or at any fashionable *réunion* to which she was invited ; and wherever she went she attracted notice, being remarkably handsome, and remarkably well got up. From time to time her name would even appear in one of the journals devoted to fashion and its votaries ; nor was its praise less just or less welcome because it happened to be an advertisement from the French milliner who dressed her, and to whose credit it was that she should look her best, and create, or be supposed to have created, a sensation.

The lovers did not often appear together in public, and Miss Graham had too many evening engagements to allow of her cousin dropping in with the hope of finding her at home. When he announced a visit, she very dutifully and readily gave up every other engagement to receive him.

One evening they were enjoying a quiet, lover-like *tête-à-tête*. A visit had been announced, as Carlton was leaving for Treherne next day.

For a wonder, they had the drawing-room to themselves and their love. Sir John, suffering from an attack of bronchitis, was confined to his room; and the elderly relative, who acted as chaperon to Miss Graham when in London, had very discreetly retired to administer comfort and a poultice to the invalid; so the cousins were for awhile left alone.

Carlton Treherne, who throughout the evening had been absent and pre-occupied, his mind engrossed by thoughts with which love and courtship had no connection what-

ever, had stretched himself upon the carpet, as he might have done upon the grass at home, and was making free with the ears and tail of a toy-terrier that had got beneath his hand. Roused at last by its absurd gambols, he looked up, and, for the first time, noticed that he and Evelyn were enjoying a *tête-à-tête*—a rare treat now, but one of which neither had as yet made the most; for having spent the previous night in an over-heated, over-crowded ball-room which, intended to hold one hundred, had been made to accommodate three, Evelyn, left to herself, had been getting more and more drowsy, until at last, when her lover looked up, he actually found her nodding.

Lying almost at her feet, he looked at her critically—at the stately, well-dressed figure, the full, bare, white arms, the gleaming neck, the perfect *coiffure*. He said to himself that it was a pity her complexion had suffered from the sun and late hours. He smiled at the rather vacant expression of the well-cut, delicate features ;

but that was taking an undue advantage—for who looks well when surreptitiously caught napping? Having himself been lost in dreams, he rather resented her going to sleep when in his company; and, instead of leaving her to her stolen slumbers, content to gaze, “and silently adore,” he was seized with a sudden conversational fit, and ruthlessly woke her up.

“Evelyn,” he said, in an injured tone, “do wake up!” Then in the rich, deep voice, every tone of which had so often thrilled, even to pain, another girlish heart, he sang, as if in mockery of himself and her—

“Oh, hast thou forgotten this day we must sever?

Oh, hast thou forgotten this day we must part?

It may be for years, and it may be for ever;

Then why art thou sleeping—thou voice of my heart?”

Poor Evelyn, awaking with a start, looked very guilty and ashamed.

“I am so sorry; but—I really could not help it. We were home so late from the ball. Aunt would stay to the last. She is so

anxious to get Blanchie married, you know. She is now trying for George Steynes, and he was just beginning to thaw when the carriage was announced ; so it had to be kept waiting, of course."

Carlton Treherne laughed. Not so his cousin. She found it quite natural, and even praiseworthy, that Blanchie's mother should try to get her married ; and to further so desirable an end, she had cheerfully submitted to an extra hour of that mild form of purgatory known as a London ball-room in the month of May.

" Poor Evelyn ! and so now that you have no matrimonial interests of your own to look after, you are expected to take up those of all your unmarried cousins ? How many of them are there, by-the-by ? and how many do you mean to have down at Treherne at a time ? The neighbourhood can only boast of three eligible matches, mind ; so the young ladies had better draw lots."

Again he laughed, still looking up at her from his station at her feet. After that

there was a silence. He was thinking ; so was she. His thoughts he did not put into words ; she did hers, after a while, with a becoming blush and some embarrassment.

“ Carlton, don't you think it would be as well to fix our wedding-day, definitely, before you go ? ”

This very proper question had been the joint suggestion of four aunts, a score of cousins, and the devoted parent, with whose delicate constitution the English climate did not agree, and who was, therefore, anxious to get abroad as soon as possible—that is to say, as soon as he had seen his daughter comfortably and advantageously settled.

Carlton Treherne, in true lover style, assured the blushing maiden that he was ready to marry her then and there, if she so pleased ; that one of the aunts had better fix the day, or all the four aunts conjointly ; only it might be as well to wait until he was M.P.—it would read better, and make him appear more worthy of her and her noble relations.

He was only laughing at her and them. But this she did not understand, and agreed, with a complacent smile, that it would be very nice to have one's husband a Member—it gave one such a position in the county.

“And if I lose the election, won't you feel half inclined to give me up?”

He had come nearer; he was kneeling before her now, his folded arms resting upon her lap. How fair and matronly she looked!—how kindly the blue eyes beamed upon him! She did not answer his question—such a foolish one as it was!

“I sometimes wish,” he continued, speaking roughly, as he always did when moved to anything like feeling, “that marriage were less a matter of business and calculation. It would be pleasant to know that the girl you married cared for the man only, and not his position. I wonder, now, if that pretty little maid of yours who married Thompson—good-for-nothing fellow though he was—spite of all opposition, clung to

him because she could not bear to live without him, or because a husband and a home were to be secured at any risk. What do you say, Evelyn ? ”

What *could* Miss Graham have to say about the loves of a lady’s maid and a carpenter !

“ Supposing, now, that you had been the pretty maid, and I the good-looking, good-for-nothing carpenter—would you have taken me ? ”

“ What an absurd question ! ”

“ And one you would rather not answer ? ”

“ How can I suppose myself a servant girl and you a common workman ? ”

“ Why not ? As the man I should be just the same. ”

She laughed softly.

“ I should have less to offer, certainly ; but it would be of my own getting, and therefore more worthy of acceptance. ”

She shrugged her white shoulders. She had little sympathy with his very liberal views, and was sometimes almost shocked

at his rough handling of society, its customs and requirements.

“And you would make the carpenter such a comely wife,” he continued, ruthlessly bent upon teasing her. “All the village would envy me, and next to my own handiwork, I should be most proud of you.”

“How can you talk such nonsense!” with gentle surprise.

“What, is love nonsense, or truth, or fidelity? Come, Evelyn, say that the little maid was right; that you would have stuck to me as she did to the good-for-nothing carpenter.”

He was only teasing her, yet there was a certain ring of earnestness both in his words and tone. The truth was, that at times, when not altogether engrossed with politics, he would be troubled by a vague longing for something he had not, and that neither ambition nor love—his love, at least, Evelyn Graham—could give him. That dissatisfied longing was upon him now, as

he looked into the smiling, gracious face—a comical look upon his own.

Evelyn, indulgent to his every mood, but not quite clear as to what was expected of her—for not even to please her lover could she put herself in the place of a serving-maid, or the master of Treherne in that of a mechanic—answered, with more than her usual softness of tone, that she had no doubt that had he been born a carpenter he would have made a very good one—he was so clever that whatever he did must be well done; at the same time she much preferred him as he was. Indeed, she never could understand how girls in that rank of life had the courage to marry. The men were all, she felt sure, dreadful, rough, brutal creatures, and their wives might think themselves lucky if they escaped being murdered. She would never feel safe with one of them. In conclusion she added—

“Papa always says that it is quite impossible for one class to understand another. I never could realize the possibility of

marrying a carpenter," with a little, scornful laugh; "and I do not think," this playfully, "that if I had been only the *pretty maid*, and not Evelyn Graham and your cousin, you would have chosen me as your wife. Do you think you would?"

It was now the gentleman's turn to leave the question unanswered. His conscience, too, gave him rather an unpleasant twinge. She would make him an exemplary wife, and Treherne a most desirable mistress; but was she the woman of his choice? The reckless, mocking look passed away from his face, which all at once grew grave, so grave that she shrank back a little, afraid that she had offended him. The most gentle, amiable, and inoffensive of women, she was always ready with a hundred mild excuses for any fancied offence.

"I hope I have not vexed you, Carlton?"

"No, dear; you are much too good to me—you always were. And as I cannot put the strength of your affection to the test by becoming a good-for-nothing carpenter,

I must take it on trust. Anyhow, we shall, no doubt, be as happy as most married couples"—here he suppressed a yawn—"only neither of us must expect too much."

How indignantly would another woman, and that, too, "the woman of his choice," have flashed out upon him at these words! How scornfully would she have flung off the lukewarm clasp of his retaining hand, and, with eye and cheek on fire, have met and defied the bold, careless glance of the grey eyes that could look so very different! But Evelyn Graham, fortunately for her lover, was never violent or passionate. As usual, she took his words literally, and as she very well knew what she had to expect—as, with a little prompting from her devoted parent, the four aunts, and score of cousins, she had more than once gone over the pretty accurate list of those same expectations—she now smiled more graciously than ever; and as she patted the large, strong hand with her white, jewelled fingers, and leaning languidly back among the rich crimson

cushions, that set off to such advantage the whiteness of her skin, looked with trusting eyes at the stern, rugged face bent towards her, she said, the soft, low voice falling, as it ever did, pleasantly, even soothingly, upon his ear—

“Do you know that I think Blanchie is quite right in what she says of you—that you are a noble savage, not half tamed yet, or civilized; that no London drawing-room ever looks grand or spacious enough to hold you comfortably, and in a ball-room you look just like a lion in a cage. She declares I shall never make anything of you—that is, make you sober and proper and well-behaved, like other men.”

“Then the sooner you set to work the better. Get Lady Blanche’s mother to fix our wedding-day. Nothing like that, my dear. The wildest savage would be tamed, I dare swear, by a fashionable wedding—his own wedding, at least.”

“And you would really wish the day fixed?”

“Of course, child. How can you doubt it? So that’s settled,” with a sigh of relief. “And now give me a kiss, and then a song.”

As she had never yet refused her lover any reasonable request, and he was not extravagant in his demands, she at once gave him what he asked for. She was no more impulsive in her caresses than in her words and actions; but her kisses were always to be had for the asking.

CHAPTER VII.

THE noonday sun pouring down an uninterrupted flood of light and heat; and lying beneath it, the rectory poultry-yard, rather untidy, and at the particular moment of which we speak, rather noisy too—hens clucking, ducks quacking, turkeys gobbling, as they rushed hither and thither madly, and after them, more madly still, a troop of children shouting and whooping. A solitary haystack in one corner; and below it, in the welcome shade it afforded, the solitary figure of a girl, with a very large hat, very large eyes, and a little pale face that was not wearing its most pleasing expression. Beside her lay a book that she had thrown aside in a pet. The time was when Rachel

Raye delighted in a novel, in a real love-tale more especially; but how false, unnatural, and unreal, did they all seem to her now! Heroines were generally fair, and fair women, she felt sure, had very little real feeling, and did not know what love was. And then the heroes, how could she possibly take any interest in *them*, when they were so very different from—well, her idea of a lover? Just fancy a girl breaking her heart about a man with red hair, or large black whiskers, or— And then, with a pout and a frown, the book would be thrown aside as unreal or unnatural.

It was many months now since the day of the fatal thunderstorm that had so completely done for a certain becoming little felt hat; but Rachel, though back once more in the bosom of the rector's family, with many duties and much wholesome occupation awaiting her in the nursery and village, had not found the perfect peace and content to which she had looked forward. She would have told you that during the

few months she had been away, uncle and aunt, cousins, Sunday scholars, and old parish women had all undergone a complete change, and certainly not for the better. Even her especial favourite, old Betsy Rowe, from whom she had taken so tender a farewell, parting from "the dear old soul" with genuine regret and an uncomfortable lump in her throat, was no longer, somehow, the same. She had grown grasping, interested, whining; her devoted attachment to her "dear young lady" had all at once degenerated into cupboard love; and when she entered into a confidential and somewhat lengthy account of the wrongdoings of her sister-in-law over the way, that same dear young lady, instead of laughing and coaxing her into good humour and charity, actually got cross, told her quite sharply to mind her own business and leave her poor old relative alone, and left her in a huff. It is true she got an extra quarter of a pound of tea the next day, and was profuse in her expressions of gratitude; at

which expressions Rachel laughed good-humouredly, but no longer gathered them to her heart as things sweet and good.

“What has come to the girl?” the rector said to his wife, when Rachel had been home about a fortnight. “I thought at first that the change had done her good—she seemed so bright and so glad to be amongst us once more; but lately she has not been herself at all. Surely you must have noticed the change?”

Noticed it! Why, of course, Aunt Julia had, and so had the children, and the village boys she taught on Sunday, and the old parish women she had under her charge.

“Do you think she can be ill, or—fretting after any one?”

“Nonsense. She’s just a little out of sorts; but she’ll soon be all right again. I knew how it would be. She got into bad ways at Didford, as I said she would. They made a great fuss about her. She was invited by all the county families, had a constant round of amusement, and nothing

to do. No wonder she finds it rather dull here. But she was all right yesterday when the Lawsons drove over. You should have heard her laugh then. Give her a little excitement, a croquet-party or two, that's all she wants to get her round."

The parties had been given—the last of the season, but not the most brilliant; for the days were short and cold, the grass damp, and on the public mind, croquet-mad during the summer, it had begun to dawn that the sending balls through hoops, however dexterously, was a bore, or at least, like all other earthly things, a delusion and a snare—set by the ladies, of course. The young men now talked of polo with enthusiasm, of croquet with supreme contempt. A curate or two still clung to it with desperate tenacity. That taken from them, what remained? But fashion is pitiless as fate. Croquet was no longer the fashion.

The garden-parties over, winter had gradually settled down over the rectory;

and never a very cheerful time there, it had been unusually long that year.

Rachel, by way of killing time, had dropped into and out of three separate flirtations, definitely quarrelled with the long-necked curate for caring too much for her, and finally decided in her own mind that life was a weariness and a burden, and that unless something wonderful were to occur to rouse her, such as her father's return from India—for that was now the only thing for which she thought it worth while to live—she should certainly take to ritualism and the black veil (her only objection to which was that she, being dark, it would not become her), or novel-writing.

So passed the winter, and then the late spring had suddenly burst in upon them. On a late spring day it was that Rachel sat beneath the haystack, ostensibly to watch the children and read her book; but in reality she was doing neither: both book and children had long since been forgotten as she sat and dreamt.

Still visiting among the poor, though not with her whole heart in her work as it had once been, she had the day before witnessed a scene that had made a deeper impression on her than did most things now. A young woman, not many months married, and scarcely older than herself, was dying, and she had seen them, husband and wife, boy and girl—the one scarcely less deathlike than the other—watching together, as they may have watched through many a long bright summer evening in their courting-days, hand in hand, silent and motionless—for the End.

“Poor young thing!” Mrs. Wilkinson had cried, full of heartfelt pity. But Rachel had envied her. She was envying her still, as she sat beneath the haystack. Death does, at times, seem less hard than life; to meet your fate less hard than to struggle against it, with a vague, despairing wonder as to how and when the struggle is to end. Rachel, in the full enjoyment of health and youth, with her whole life before her, was

envying the dying woman. She, to whom life had seemed but a few short months before a thing so altogether beautiful and desirable, and the mere fact of existence a blessing for which to be grateful to God, now thought of death with a feeling of rapture such as she had not known for a very long time. Was it not her only chance of seeing *him*? He would come to her if she were dying; he must. She could not die in peace unless she had seen him again. He would sit beside her, as she had seen the young husband sit, and hold her hand in his strong, warm grasp, and let her lie quite still and look at him. Oh, how she longed, how she longed to look into his face! Only thinking of it, her own flushed up quite red, and her heart beat as he only, or the thought of him, could make it beat; and the young blood went rushing tumultuously through her veins, thrilling every nerve, even to the tips of the small, hot fingers, so tightly clasped together for very longing. "I would ask him to stay by me to the end,

that my eyes might close upon a last kind look; and if he left me, I would close them just the same as though I were already dead. When they ceased to look upon him they should look upon no one else. But he would not leave me; I know he would not. He would hold my hand in his, as he did that evening; but its touch would not make me feel so strange then—only so happy and so glad to die. And when I felt my pulse growing fainter and fainter, and my eyes closing, and all around getting so cold and still, I would ask him to kiss me, and so death would bring him nearer to me than life ever could.”

Involuntarily, she half stretched out her arms, sighed, and as she let her head drop languidly back against the hay and closed her eyes, she saw herself lying dead, and the big, stern man she had rejected, but still cared for so foolishly, looking down on her with grey, solemn, pitying eyes. As a vision, she looked remarkably well in her shroud—better than in a ball-dress, and

even better than in the loose jacket and short skirt that had so delighted her—and one more beside. So she dwelt quite complacently on the thought of the shrouded figure, with the flowers on its breast and about the pillow, the white of all around contrasting so favourably with the dark softness of the dead face, framing which and lying long and broad over the gleaming shroud, were the brown, rich, wonderful plaits—the plaits *he* had caressed, and admired, *too*—she was quite sure of that—and which must not therefore be cut off and laid aside, to live after her, but go down to the grave with the hand he had held, the lips he had kissed, the eyes that had closed over his image, and would retain it as dead eyes will retain—

A yell, a shout, a fresh arrival in the yard—the barking of a dog, the fury of a turkey-cock, a mingling of sound, wild and discordant, that might well have awakened the dead—and which effectually awakened Rachel, who was not dead, but dreaming.

“Johnny, Johnny, how could you let Klint in! Oh dear, oh dear! Down, Klint! Here, sir! Naughty dog!”

Oh, the injustice of our friends, even the best and truest of them! It was not Klint who had attacked the turkey-cock. He had come in, with hanging tongue and wagging tail, very hot, very glad to have found his mistress, and in a much more peaceful and amiable mood than are most animals, whether man or beast, with the thermometer at 90 in the shade; and lo! the turkey-cock, with flaming countenance and trailing, rustling wing, had come to meet him, giving him anything but a courteous reception. Is it, then, surprising that the visitor thus received should, being naturally hot-tempered, have had some idea of wringing his host's neck? that his tail, as it ceased to wag, should begin to stiffen, and his eyes to roll and blink, and his teeth to show themselves in rather an alarming manner? More and more noisy and furious grew the bold champion of the poultry-yard; quieter,

stiffer, more menacing the form of his antagonist. Never was turkey-cock's neck in more imminent peril, when all at once the aggrieved party found his own unceremoniously seized, and the growl, which was but the very natural expression of his outraged feelings, cut short by a little imperious hand closing over his mouth.

Give a dog a bad name, and hang him. The turkey-cock strutted off very big and important, little dreaming of the jeopardy in which pride had placed his neck; and Klint, having been well scolded, was hurried off to solitary confinement, there to brood at his leisure over his wrong-doings or his wrongs. Perhaps he, too, began to realize a change somewhere, but not in himself. Was a turkey-cock's neck a thing more sacred than a butcher-boy's leg? And how often had he attacked the latter without provocation, and yet with impunity—nay, even been laughed at and hugged for his naughtiness. The time was, indeed, when the merry, brown-eyed mistress could only

coax and laugh; but times at least were changed, if she was not. So reasoned Klint, perhaps, as he buried his nose between his big, clumsy paws; whilst the young mistress, cross with him and Johnny and the sun, all three of which had conspired to make her feel so hot, returned to the kindly shelter of the haystack and her meditations.

But the vision of Rachel Raye with her white shroud and aureole of summer blossoms had vanished beyond recall. Still the girl's thoughts dwelt on the dying woman, who was leaving all that she loved upon earth to go where—and to what? To something better or more worth having than the love of the young husband? Love—how could it exist without the body. Genius—yes, and affection and charity and many other beautiful things, but love was a thing so earthly: you felt it in your pulse, your breast, your brain; it throbbed through every nerve, it was rapture or pain, actual physical pain—but take away the body that felt, and what was it?

Once more the gate swung open, and there was a second interruption quite as noisy as the first, but not caused by Klint this time, for he, poor old dog, was sleeping or brooding with his nose between his big, clumsy paws.

“Charlie has come, Rachel—Charlie has come!”

CHAPTER VIII.

A GALLANT young officer returning suddenly and unexpectedly from the wars—from the dreadful Ashantee war! Home on sick leave, scarce recovered from the yellow fever, and still interestingly languid and sallow.

It was but natural that the rector and his wife, being very proud of their soldier son, who was not a whit better than other young men of his age, only rather more conceited and extravagant, should give him a delighted welcome, and make much of him whilst still in happy ignorance of the amount of his debts. Equally natural was it that the rectory children, proud of owning a brother who had a sword and gave himself such airs, should leap about him like so

many wild savages, and vie with each other in brotherly attentions that were less well received than meant. And it was not unnatural, perhaps, that when Rachel, who had been Charlie's sweetheart for the last ten years, on and off, appeared at the dinner-table (it was only when the gallant young officer was at home that they indulged in late dinners at the rectory), she looked brighter in her looks, and smarter in her dress than she had done since the day when ritualism and novel-writing had first been thought of, as the only alternative possible to a lonely, blighted life.

She did not care for Charlie any more than she did for Cousin Johnnie, she said to herself, as she weighed the comparative merits of a muslin and the memorable black silk that still held the first rank in her wardrobe. But she could no more help trying to look her best, and brightening up at the prospect of a change in the dull monotony of her life, than she could help feeling warm when the sunlight found her

out. She did not wish to mope and fret. She only did so now and then, because she could not help it. A heavy trouble had fallen upon her life—a trouble that at times seemed more than she could bear; and it no longer came so naturally to her to laugh and be amused. But who could help being amused at the absurd stories Charlie told? It was better than reading an exciting novel, for Charlie was always the hero of every story, and, as her cousin, he was naturally more interesting than any fictitious hero.

Sitting opposite her at the dinner-table, he had the full benefit of her looks and smiles. He was accustomed to have his good stories appreciated; but it was not often he had a pretty girl like Rachel as auditor. He felt quite grateful to her for being there to amuse him and relieve the dulness of his home life; for his parents, though "excellent creatures," were poor company, and the children insufferable little plagues.

As they stood together at the door leading into the garden, waiting for the rector, who had volunteered to accompany his son in an evening stroll (a cigar after dinner being an absolute necessity to the young man's existence), but could not venture out into the evening damp without certain precautions—galoshes, an overcoat, a muffler, etc., he contrived to say with much fervour:

“I'm awfully glad to find you here, Rachel. It *would* be slow without you.”

“Well, it is slow,” with a brisk little nod and sigh of resignation, “particularly of an evening. It is always the same thing—baby talk and parish talk, then the parliamentary debates that are so long and dull. But we go to bed early,” with another sigh, this time of relief.

The lieutenant shuddered. “Poor child! You must have been moped to death. But now I am here——”

“Oh, now you are here it will be all right. But you won't be away longer than you can help? You won't smoke more

than one cigar, will you?" as a muffled figure was seen approaching.

"No, by Jove!" and the lieutenant, as he caressed his shirt-collar and blonde moustache with careless grace, felt some inches taller than before Rachel had spoken.

"What a pretty girl Rachel is!" he was pleased to observe, when he and his father had made the tour of the garden in perfect silence; for he was busy with his cigar, and the rector, though proud of his son—of his good looks, and dash, and knowledge of the world—had not much in common with him, and was quite content, therefore, having the honour of his company, to walk beside him in silence, his hands crossed behind him, his eyes on the ground, his thoughts wholly given to a certain pig-headed farmer who stubbornly refused to see that it would be to his advantage, as to that of the whole parish, that the village should be properly drained, and opposed every measure advanced by the committee, with the obsti-

nacy peculiar to his class. But when the lieutenant condescended at last to speak, he smiled, well pleased at the sound of his son's voice.

“She has wonderfully improved since I saw her last—grown into quite a young woman—and as merry as ever!”

“Well, her spirits are not what they were. Ever since her visit to your Aunt Mary, mother and I have noticed a change in her. Perhaps she finds it dull. But now you are come——”

“It will be all right.” And again Charlie caressed his moustache and shirt-collar, and thought what a fine fellow he was, and how grateful Cousin Rachel must be to him for having come to relieve the dulness of her life.

That she was very glad to have him home there could be no doubt. His return made everything seem brighter to her. The very drawing-room wore quite another aspect—so much more cheerful and homelike, as she sat at the window and watched for his

return. When he did come in at last, having, faithless to his promise, smoked two cigars instead of one, she received him with her brightest smiles. And when, claiming the privilege of an invalid, he stretched himself on the sofa, she brought her low American chair close up to it, sitting where she could look into his face, and he into hers, putting herself forward, and monopolizing him in a way that would have been quite inexcusable, had they not been cousins and sweethearts of long standing. She brought him his tea, and wrapped a plaid quite tenderly about him. Was he not her handsome Cousin Charlie—an interesting invalid—home on sick leave? Then reseated herself closer to him still, and hanging, another Desdemona, on his every word, laughed at his jokes; opened the brown eyes very wide at his thrilling martial experiences; and later on in the evening, when tired of talking, which was little wonder, he having been hard at it for some hours, he leant languidly back, and

called for a song, she rose at once, quite glad to do anything to please him.

The rector looked at her, curiously, over the gold rim of his spectacles. For years she had sung him to sleep of an evening, regularly and dutifully, without protestation or excuse, indulging him with lullaby after lullaby; he graciously acknowledging the first and last by half opening one eye, and giving utterance to a drowsy—"Thank you, my dear—very nice—very nice indeed!" But ever since that fatal visit to Aunt Mary, the peculiar charm of the evening nap had been over for the rector. Rachel, grown restive, would not sing to him. She said she could not, that her voice was gone. Anyhow, she did not. She kept her lullabies for the babies, and made a compromise with her uncle by reading to him, instead, the leading articles and parliamentary debates. But he could not sleep as comfortably upon them as upon the songs, and often wondered at the child's obduracy. Had she not been so taken up

with the task of pleasing the handsome soldier cousin, the look sent to her from over the gold-rimmed spectacles might have pricked her conscience ; but the fine blue eyes had turned upon her at the same time as the spectacles, so she was not likely to take any particular notice of the latter.

“She is a pretty girl, and it’s awfully jolly having her here,” Lieutenant Wilkinson said to himself as, having loudly protested against, and expressed his contempt for, the primitive hours patronized by his benighted parents, he retired to his room, in company with a well-filled cigar-case, and tray equally well filled ; for though the rector was uncompromising in his condemnation of spirits as a merely vicious indulgence, he could have no possible objection to them when taken as a cure for Indian fever. “I always thought her a nice little thing, and very good company, only rather lanky, and too saucy and independent in her ways. But two years of Riverton rectory life would tame the wildest spirit.

Parish work and babies! I will provide her with pleasanter occupation, though, now. She shall amuse me!" this with so superb an air that it was really quite a pity no one else was by to be impressed by it, as he was himself.

And meanwhile, Rachel, who did not care more for Cousin Charlie than for Cousin Johnny or Tom, only that he was more amusing, and just then more of a novelty, lay in her little white bed, with a very white little face, or so it looked in the moonlight, and red tell-tale rims about the closed eyes. Over the coverlet, as if it had been the shroud of which she had dreamt, lay, straight and long and broad, one plait of the wonderful brown hair. The other she held tightly clasped to her breast beneath the hot folded hands. He had caressed it once, and it soothed and comforted her to have it lying there.

Night is the time for heart-ache. After the laughter and music and excitement of the evening had come a reaction, and

Rachel had cried herself to sleep. What were Charlie's good looks, or his good stories either, compared with what she had lost! Then came the old passionate regret, and the doubts, that made the poor child's trouble so much harder to bear. "Oh, if he had but really cared for me, or not cared for me at all! If he had not set himself against me, not thinking me worthy of his love; or they had not torn me from him by telling me that he was engaged—that he had loved *her* all his life, and already looked upon her as his wife! And I don't believe it!" It was then the passionate tears had broken out. "If he loved her why has he not married her? There would be nothing to prevent *their* marrying and being happy; nobody would come between and part *them*. Did he perhaps, after all, really love me, as he said he did; and was I mad to throw his love away?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE heat of yesterday was nothing compared to the heat of to-day! When are the things of yesterday comparable to the things of to-day, either for good or ill? What we *are* feeling must be an experience more real and vivid than what we *have* felt. It is only amid the weakness of old age, when actual feeling has lost much of its power, that the *was* supersedes the *is*; hence the fancy of old people to dwell upon the past.

The schoolroom blinds were down, the schoolroom windows open, and yet no air came in, and a great deal of sun. Round the table, ink-blotted, and tear-blotted too, no doubt, only tears leave no trace behind

—perhaps because they are gathered ere they dry, so we are told, by angel hands—sat some half a dozen victims to the march of civilization and the necessity laid upon each male child to do battle with and conquer reading, writing, ciphering, Latin, French, German, music.—Oh, how poor Rachel's head ached as she glanced down the list on that hot May morning!

She had a perfect right to indulge in a headache, and feel cross and nervous, for she was grown up; but what possible right could the extra degrees of heat give Messieurs John, Thomas, Cecil, etc., to be extra stupid and inattentive? Nerves are the prerogative of adults, and they know how to turn them to account; the juveniles can have no pity shown them, except in the case of measles, whooping-cough, or confirmed spinal complaint, which, together with one or two other childish maladies, perhaps, constitute their sole legitimate claim to consideration.

Rachel pushed back the damp hair from

her forehead—the low, dark, expressive brow that people found so strangely attractive, but which was just then not as smooth as it should have been. Was there not every excuse for her ruffled feelings, in the thought that air and shade were to be found under the great elm tree, or beneath the haystack? And then, too, the children were so stupid, and so ungrateful!

Why, there was Johnny, the happy possessor of a “Latin made easy,” puzzling and sulking over his declensions, and knowing as little about them—as she did herself, she might have added, but did not. And Tom, the bright one of the family, lately promoted to subtraction, had been paying back the borrowed *one* to the figure from which it had been taken, with an exactness that did credit to his principles but not to his cousin’s teaching. Whilst Cecy, for whose infantile delight had been compiled a “Reading without tears,” had already that morning shed over it almost as many as Rachel herself had shed the night before,

which tears, smeared over the chubby face by a grubby little fist, had certainly not contributed to its cleanliness or beauty.

No wonder that Cousin Rachel's patience was well-nigh exhausted. *She* certainly did not find it very interesting to read that. "A hog sat in a bog," and "Mag sat in a bag." But, then, the book had not been compiled for her.

Cecy had, with the help of the tears, and a good deal of prompting, reached the last word of his lesson at which he had regularly stuck fast for the last week. "B—a—g," he drawled out.

"Well?" said Rachel, encouragingly. He must say the word; but oh! she did so long to get rid of him.

"B—a—g."

"Well?" she repeated, breathlessly. "B—a—g spells——"

But just then her own canary bird, who did not mind the heat at all, and felt quite grateful for the sunlight that found its way through the blinds, broke forth into a per-

fect paroxysm of song, and Cecy, his eyes fixed upon the cage, forgot to answer.

“B—a—g spells what, Cecy?” persisted Rachel, her voice quite tremulous. “Do say it right, there’s a good boy, and you can go and play. B—a—g?”

“Cat,” answered Cecy dreamily, his eyes still fixed upon the cage.

To Rachel’s credit be it said, that she did not pull the soft woolly hair, or slap the pudgy hands so demurely folded. She only felt very hot and miserable, and stared blankly at the little rebel, who, reckless of consequences, still smiled upward towards the cage, oblivious of all else but “dicky-bird” and his song.

A quick, eager step up the stairs, the door was burst open, and Charlie the soldier brother stood among them.

It was his first appearance in public that morning: a dashing young officer home on sick leave can’t be expected to appear at the breakfast-table or family prayers.

“I see how it is,” he cried, glancing

fiercely round the room. "Teaching in the morning; parish visiting in the afternoon; and newspapers and lullabies in the evening. And then they wonder that you're moped to death! Now then, you young rascals. Books away—and be off! Nonsense," as she laid a protesting hand on his arm and glanced piteously around. "I want you, and they don't, or their looks very much belie them. I can do nothing without you, and they will do nothing with you." He waved his hand majestically by way of dismissal, a hint his small brothers were not slow to take, and the delighted whoop and shout drowned the one dissenting voice. What a rush there was down the stairs! Evidently they could not feel themselves safe until the hall door had banged to behind them.

One only of the troop was left. Poor little Cecy was not quick at anything, not even at taking profitable hints; and he was now staring, open-eyed and mouthed, at the tall brother, who had not, as yet, condescended to notice him.

“Well, youngster, and why are you not off with the rest? One—two—three—and away!”

“Oh no, Charlie—please don’t. He must say his word, indeed he must. He has been so obstinate.” And Rachel looked up with something of the old fire in her eyes; for she was quite undecided whether to be grateful for his interference, or to resent it. “Now, Cecy,” this very solemnly, “b—a—g.”

“Rat?” suggested the young gentleman, now as much taken up with the soldier brother as he had before been with the dicky-bird. On that brother Rachel cast an appealing look, and he came gallantly to the rescue.

“Sir!” he cried, falling into an attitude, and assuming a martial air and tone that became him well, and were intended to fill Rachel with admiration. “Do you know how we punish rebels in the country from which I come?—when they are obstinate, for instance, and won’t say their lesson?”

We send for a sack, and tie them up in it, only leaving out the head; and that looks dreadful, for their faces are—well, even *blacker than yours at this moment*,”—an awful stress laid upon the last words. “How would you like to be tied up in a sack for not saying your lesson? Now, sir,” with a severity that froze the blood in the rebel’s veins, “what does b—a—g spell?”

“Sack,” gasped the delinquent, whose eyes protruded, and who seemed on the point of suffocation, as if the string were already round his throat.

“Bravo!” cried the officer in command. “The culprit is acquitted—he has said his lesson. Sack or bag, it’s all the same.”

In vain Rachel protested that it was not, indignantly declaring that, instead of helping her, he had so hopelessly complicated affairs, that it had become a matter of serious doubt, whether Master Cecil Wilkinson would ever now, to the end of his natural life, attain to the knowledge that

b—a—g spelt bag. The said Cecil was released, and Rachel carried off in triumph.

“No more lessons whilst I stay, or parish visiting, or newspaper reading; but lullabies as many as you, and I, please. Those are my orders.” And, standing beneath the great elm tree with the air around her, and overhead the gracious sunlight, not hot and oppressive here as it was in the school-room, she made up her mind to be grateful only, and not resentful.

An hour or so passed away pretty quickly and agreeably then, and more than an hour when, later on in the day, they took a ride together. Riding, like music, had been almost given up. What profit was there in that or in anything else in life? But when poor Charlie, who seemed so fond of her, and still looked so sallow and interesting, asked her to ride with him, he not being up to much walking yet, and not at all disposed to do anything without her, which was very flattering to her feelings, how could she have been cruel enough to refuse?

It cost her an effort to say yes ; but she was rewarded by the pleasure of seeing herself once more in her habit ; and, no doubt, she found Charlie a pleasanter companion than his brother Johnny, who never would keep up, and whose very diminutive and shaggy pony caused such a sensation in the villages through which they passed, that it had all the boys and dogs at its heels.

At dinner that evening she wore a very handsome set of Indian ornaments presented to her by the lieutenant, who had, in fact, brought them for his mother ; but this neither Mrs. Wilkinson nor Rachel was ever to know. Mothers are all very well in their way, and their dutiful sons will think of them quite naturally, when at a distance, and down with fever. But a pretty cousin is better still, and more worth the trouble of pleasing. Rachel was made to believe that, her image having wholly filled the heart of the warrior, both in the camp and battlefield, the ornaments had been selected with an eye to her taste and complexion ; and,

indeed, they became her well, and gave her quite an Eastern appearance. As a reward for his gallantry and devotion, she sang him in the gloaming all his favourite songs, the rector now taking his nap in comfort, and the mother being upstairs with the baby.

“Now, Rachel, I must have one more song. You may have forgotten it, but I have not. That old hymn, that you learnt from your Scotch nurse. You used to sing it to the babies, I remember.”

She remembered it too; but she would not have sung it to him had she liked him twice as well, and had he emptied all the bazaars of the East to provide her with ornaments. It was the hymn some one else had caught her singing as she sat on the stile and watched the sunrise over the river that bounded *his* home. And afterwards, when she knew him better, or fancied she did, he had asked her for it again, telling her, in his rough, earnest way, that the tune had haunted him ever since he had first

heard it. She sang it to the babies still sometimes—to little Bertie, at least, the small, sickly, fretful child, who alone, perhaps, of the whole house did not find her changed; but she would not sing it to Cousin Charlie. Why had he reminded her of it!

As she rose abruptly from the piano, all of life and colour had faded from her face. She did not go near the sofa on which the invalid reclined, but took possession of the big chair just facing that in which the rector sat nodding.

Charlie, with a view to making himself agreeable, dashed at once into one of his best mess-room stories, happily unconscious, the room lying amid the twilight shadows, that he was not being listened to.

“*He* never paid me a compliment,” Rachel was saying to herself, contrasting the stern reserve of the one man with the gallant, caressing flattery of the other. “And yet he *did* admire me”—looks are often more eloquent than words; his looks

had told her this, and she still dwelt proudly on the thought—"and he would have loved me too, if he had known me better. Who will ever be to him what I would have been? Not Miss Graham. She cared no more for him than I do for Charlie; and if he had loved her he would have married her. He would have married *me* in spite of all."

Still the same cruel doubts. If she had, in her reckless, despairing passion thrown away his love, what could ever again make up to her for what she had lost? Had he really loved her?

With a fine flourish Charlie wound up his really capital story. But it had also been quite lost upon his should-be hearers; for his father not only nodded, but slept soundly; and Cousin Rachel sat huddled up in the big chair as white and still and forlorn, as if he had never come from the wars to cheer her, never made her laugh and sing and brighten up to welcome him. His voice was in her ear, and from both

ears and throat dangled the costly trinkets he had given her ; but with what rapture would she have exchanged them for one look, one word, from some one else—a leaf falling from his hand to the ground, and for his sake picked up and treasured !

Thus are gifts valued, comparatively. Is the love that can so idealize, sublime or ridiculous ?

Charlie, as he retired that night with the cigar-case and the tray, felt more than ever convinced of the impression he had made. “Poor little thing !” was his last self-complacent thought. “I am afraid I made her jealous. She looked quite pale and out of sorts after hearing of *la belle Marie* and her fatal passion for me.” Poor Miss Mary O’Dowd, spite of your fifteen stone weight and fifty years of virginity, you needed but a little touching up to be transformed into a heroine of romance !

CHAPTER X.

It is a beneficent law of Nature that nothing shall be lost, nothing wasted. What becomes of all the things flung aside as useless, and which, spread over the face of the earth, would more than cover its surface, and render it loathsome and unsightly? Ask Nature—she knows. Nothing with her can be wasted. Under her silent teaching science has learnt the great lesson of utilization. But much as it has done and is doing day by day, there is still great apparent waste—apparent only, for the things for which science has no use, and therefore buries out of sight, are gathered back into the earth from which they must originally, in one shape or another, have

sprung, and there a use is found for them— for with her nothing can be lost ! Is it the same with human nature ? And if so, what becomes of all the feeling apparently so utterly recklessly thrown away?—the love of parents, of foolish women, of men, too, sometimes. Why, even the devotion of a dog is a thing too good to be altogether lost ; and what, then, can be said of the devotion, the self-abnegation, the all-engrossing love of the widowed mother for her only son, who is quite as much engrossed with himself as she with him, and generously allows himself to be idolized and slaved for until another younger and prettier woman takes her place, and, indeed, ousts her out of all place either in his heart or home ? The love of the foolish girl for her lover, who is idealized, dreamed of, believed in, worshipped ; and who, in his heart, is rather proud of making a fool of her. He can smile indulgently over the blind delusion, for he loves another woman better than her, and the money for which he sells

his bachelorhood better than both. The love of the man thrown so recklessly away upon the pretty singer, actress, or coquette who accepts his gifts, and his love as a good speculation, and turns into ridicule the man himself who has gathered her to his heart as altogether beautiful and sacred. And last, but not least, perhaps, the faithful dog wearing out its big generous heart in love for the master who will deny it the comfort of his presence for a mere caprice, and, making it follow a submissive slave at his heels, will kick it if it venture too near. Oh, fools and blind! What a prodigious amount of waste, what a wild squandering of all the good things of life at once—health and joy and hope, until it be left bankrupt!

Was this the cry of Rachel's heart as she read a certain letter that she found awaiting her one morning on the breakfast-table?—a letter from Didford, containing a choice piece of news which, as Aunt Mary expressed it, "could not fail to interest all those who enjoyed the privilege of a per-

sonal acquaintance with Squire Treherne." That privilege had been Rachel's—a personal acquaintance. Yes, their acquaintance had been a *personal* one—heart to heart, eye to eye, lip to lip. She set her teeth very hard. If she could at that moment have dashed herself to the ground, or torn the letter into a thousand pieces, and stamped it into nothingness beneath her feet, it would, no doubt, have been a relief to her. She looked up from the open letter quite white and scared, then towards the door, like some hunted creature longing to escape. But breakfast had to be finished. After that she disappeared, and was seen no more that day.

"It's really quite absurd," Mrs. Wilkinson observed severely, seeing that her seat at both the dinner and tea table remained empty, "to take herself off in this way, and sulk the whole day because Charlie has gone to town. I heard her ask him yesterday not to go. She was at him about it the whole evening. But he can't humour all

her childish caprices; it would be very wrong of him to do so."

The rector and his wife were now more than ever convinced that Rachel was desperately in love with the lieutenant, and was fretting and sulking over the fortnight's absence, about which she had so unmercifully teased him the day before.

Quite late in the evening the truant was found seated beside Bertie's crib. She had been there some time singing and hushing him to sleep. Bending low over his pillow, her face could not be seen. When spoken to, her voice was very low and subdued, scarcely more than a whisper; but having with so much trouble got him off to sleep at last, it was but natural that she should hush her tones for fear of awaking him.

She was not seen again that evening. From Bertie's crib she went to her own room, saying that she had been a long way and felt so tired. That was just what she looked, thoroughly tired, worn out, in fact. And no wonder! In those few hours, spent

no one knew where or how, she had had to do battle with almost every passion of which the human heart is capable—passions, one of which, not a whit more intense, has so often led to crime. Anger, hatred, pride, wounded vanity, love, scorn, shame, despair—she had done battle with them all; but she said to herself that the struggle was over, quite over for ever, and that all she now felt was tired. Let us hope that it was so.

The news that had condemned Mrs. Lane's niece to a day of fasting and lonely penance had been known to herself and all Didford long before it travelled south. Mr. Treherne's engagement to his cousin caused no surprise—it was what had been confidently expected; the general belief being that the engagement had been formed years before. It would be a perfectly proper and suitable match, about which very little need, or could, be said.

What caused far more excitement in the public mind was the approaching election.

The nearer the time approached, the more eager grew each party. The Liberal candidate had been much from home, up in London, devoting himself to politics and politicians. His name had been more than once in the papers, mentioned casually; but even a casual mention seemed to promise well for the future—"When he was to be one of the leading men of the day!" So said his partisans, and they were many.

At a public dinner, having been asked to speak, he had made a few direct, earnest, practical remarks—not a word too much. Indeed, he would have been listened to had his speech been twice as long. Many who heard him said that he was a rising man, and would go far; and his words, copied into the Didford local paper, read very well, and caused general satisfaction. Oratory is so very rare a gift, and the one of all others most appreciated because so rare.

Carlton Treherne, having enjoyed a few weeks of London and London society, was not sorry to find himself back at Treherne.

In London, it is true, he had his club and Evelyn Graham ; but freedom and fresh air are, after all, things more indispensable to animal comfort. The grand old rooms through which he could stride with head erect and lungs expanded, were a pleasant exchange for the bachelor apartment in St. James's Street, where he could not stretch his limbs without meeting some obstacle in the way of furniture or wall—and as to free breathing, that was an unpurchasable luxury.

Perhaps pretty Blanche Verner was not far wrong in her judgment when she pronounced him a magnificent savage. Certain savage instincts were strong in him.

Having returned to the shade of his own park, he did not regret that other park where the vulgar walked and stared, and the fashionables drove and lounged, and bowed and yawned, and where Evelyn's charming bonnet was to be seen daily. It is doubtful, indeed, whether he regretted anything or anybody he had left behind. He had been

well received in circles fashionable and political; and it was gratifying to think that he had already made his mark and gained a hearing in that mighty centre of all great struggles, whether individual or natural. When he returned there as M.P. he would be warmly welcomed by his party—that he knew; and this fresh success, this new experience of his powers, served rather to increase the faith he had in himself and his future. But he was not impatient. What was to be would be. Though anxious for success, he did not fear defeat. Thirty years of unclouded prosperity might well inspire him with confidence in his destiny. He was born to win and to command. The past, much as he had already effected in it, he only now looked upon as the stepping-stone to the future. Ambition has no limits; and Carlton Treherne was essentially an ambitious man.

On his return home he found that the last few weeks had greatly increased his prospects of success. The Conservative

party talked much and loudly. His party spoke less, but wore a smiling, self-complacent air that could only mean confidence in their superior strength. The day after his return a meeting was held, at which he was present, and addressed his constituents in a short but powerful speech ; and it was after the meeting, when, alighting from his horse, feeling rather tired, and decidedly hungry, that he was informed that Mr. Rawdon the schoolmaster was waiting to speak with him.

A shade of impatience crossed the squire's face.

“ Where is he ? ”

“ He was in the picture-gallery,” the butler said ; “ for Mr. Mann, the steward, was waiting to speak with Mr. Treherne in the library.”

“ Is dinner ready ? ”

“ Yes, sir, and waiting.”

Squire Treherne, wishing people would time their visits better, said that Mr. Rawdon must be asked to wait, and went at

once to the library. The steward had come on business which must be first attended to. What had brought the schoolmaster at that unseasonable hour he did not trouble himself to guess; probably, he had come to pay his respects to his patron, and to express his satisfaction at his return.

John Rawdon, who had already been waiting some time, was further politely informed by the butler that Mr. Treherne was back, and would come to him presently; meanwhile, would he wait? And the schoolmaster bowed his head in humble acquiescence. He objected to being kept waiting—most people do; but there were other things to which he objected far more, and to which he was yet obliged to submit. So he stood, feeling too anxious to think of sitting down, or making himself comfortable, leaning—for his lameness made standing an exertion—against the heavy oaken window-frame; a pale, dejected, insignificant figure in the grand old hall, hung round with successive generations of Tre-

hernes, whose dependents, nay, servants, the Rawdons had been from time immemorial. As a dependent he now stood waiting for the saving word in which lay his last hope. The squire was his friend, had been his schoolfellow. Though a Treherne, he prided himself even more upon his Liberalism than upon his ancestry, or so, at least, he fancied. He was the friend of the people, was going into the House as their representative, there to stand up for their rights; he had thought deeply and spoken eloquently upon the equality of man and man, the only distinctions worthy the name—education, character, individual worth or talent. John Rawdon, who for more than two years had been his companion and playfellow, should know him better than most. They had been together as boy and boy then. They now met as man and man—in education, character, individual talent and worth, equals; yet the schoolmaster knew that from first to last between them there was the great gulf fixed, across which the outstretched hand of friendship

could not reach. Enthusiasts may write and speak, but the impassable barrier of social distinction will not all at once fall down, like the walls of Jericho, before the silver trumpets of oratory.

John Rawdon knew that his patron would help him if he could—of that he never for a moment doubted; but there was at times a subtle mockery in his look, a brusque imperiousness in his tone, which made it painful to apply to him.

To be kept waiting in a state of miserable suspense, which becomes all the more unbearable as the minutes drag slowly on, is a trial. John Rawdon sighed wearily, shifted his position, and wished that he had been shown into any other room. He could not feel himself comfortable alone with all those still, dead Treherne faces staring at him with cold, proud, stony eyes, as if resenting the intrusion of one so mean and unworthy into the sanctuary of their solitude. He was not accustomed to the ghostly companionship of family portraits, and they troubled him rather.

Facing the spot where he stood, hung the portrait of Guy Treherne, the man who had constituted himself his patron without having ever given him a friendly word or look. Never during his lifetime had the blue, prominent eyes met him as they were doing now—the wild, wistful, troubled eyes, that had made Rachel feel so sorry for him. Altogether, the picture was an uncomfortable one. The longer the schoolmaster looked at it the more weird and lifelike did it seem to grow. The pale thin lips, as the evening shadows trembled about them, seemed to quiver and part as with an effort to speak. Even the long, white, delicate hand upon which every Treherne had hitherto prided himself, and which the painter, to flatter the traditional vanity, had made as conspicuous as possible, seemed actually to flutter and rise and move towards him, with wan, faint beckonings.

“Ah, Rawdon. Good evening. So sorry to have kept you waiting; but business detained me.”

It was no wan or shadowy hand held out to the schoolmaster this time. The squire, coming in through the library at his back, had made him start more nervously even than usual. He looked up, but the grave, massive face was not wearing its most encouraging expression. He could not guess that he was keeping the master of Treherne from his dinner, and that a very busy day and long ride had made him hungry. Had he come an hour later he might have got a more cordial reception. The squire asked after Mrs. Rawdon, and hoped all was going on well at the school. The point-blank question made the schoolmaster wince, and start afresh.

“That was what brought me here this evening. I am rather late, I fear, but I heard you would be leaving Treherne, and things can't go on as they are doing now.”

The squire frowned slightly, but John Rawdon need not have felt so nervous and guilty; it was a way he had, nothing more. To some faces, and they not always the

worst, a frown comes more naturally than any other expression. Squire Treherne's features were stern at all times. He hardly noticed the schoolmaster's extreme agitation, he was thinking more of his petition than of him. If called upon to help, he must know the rights of the case. Had he been less direct and positive in his questions, the petitioner's feelings might have been spared, but he himself would have been kept waiting much longer for his dinner—not that he thought of that at the moment, though.

The decision to which he came was satisfactory, at least. John Rawdon, the *protégé* of his house, must not be turned out of the situation in which he had placed him. Perhaps he half regretted his ever having been placed in it, and no doubt he concurred in the general verdict that he was unfit for it. Had not John Rawdon himself once said that it had been better and happier for him to have been left as he was? What had education done for him but place him

in a false position? The squire may have thought as he did, Liberal though he was, and the zealous advocate of universal education as the most powerful and surest leveller.

“Old Bates is at the bottom of all this,” he said, after a moment’s thoughtful pause, and on his face was the look from which the man who had the education of a gentleman without the position of one, so instinctively shrank. Perhaps, indeed, he did just then feel more of contempt than pity for one whose well-being and honour could be at the mercy of such as Farmer Bates and his son Jim. “He is very anxious for the boy to get into my Works. It’s as fair an opening for a young man as any other: the wages are good, and he can’t do any mischief there”—with his careless laugh—“unless he gets himself entangled in the machinery. I will see about it. You may trust the matter to me.” He moved a step back, and held out his hand by way of dismissal. John Rawdon took the hint and

the hand, and limped slowly and wearily to the door, followed by his host.

So the two men went their way—the one to his dinner, to dream as he ate of fame and fortune, of the proud and boundless career of usefulness that his own will and energy had carved out for him; the other to his wife, to tell her of their last hope, such as it was—the hope that he might yet keep his situation, lowered in his own eyes and in those of all whom he served; tolerated, not for his own sake, but for that of the noble and generous patron to whom he owed everything—even this last hope.

So the two men went their way—equals in education, talent, worth, and character; living scarce a stone's throw from each other—the one within, the other without, the park gates, and between them the Great Gulf Fixed.

Over the silent gallery, meanwhile, where hung successive generations of Trehermes, the grey evening shadows had gathered and closed. Into those shrouding shadows most

of the cold faces had one by one retired ; but through the high mullioned window on the opposite wall still fell a thin silver line of light, and over the pale, painted face of Guy Treherne it moved and quivered, and wild and wistful the blue eyes still looked out upon the spot where the lame school-master had stood—a lone, dejected figure. Once more, in the uncertain flickering light, the pale lips seemed to quiver and part as with an effort to speak ; whilst the hand, of whose beauty the dead man had been so proud, of whose uselessness Katherine Treherne had been so ashamed, seemed to rise and flutter and move forward with wan, faint beckonings.

CHAPTER XI.

CARLTON TREHERNE had said that John Rawdon must not be turned out of his situation; and he got his own way in that, as in everything else. How he managed it, was best known to himself. Farmer Bates was his tenant, and so were many of those who were bitter against the schoolmaster. The farmer, who had been most violent, and excited others to opposition, now told them, with a sulky growl, that they would do well to leave the master and his affairs alone; the squire had taken the matter up, and he was not the man to be trifled with. It was no concern of theirs, after all. Let him stay: there were ways of paying him out and proving what they thought of him, besides turning him out of the place.

Jim had got a situation in the Treherne Iron Works, where he was well paid, and had every chance of getting on.

“Nothing like regular work to keep a young man out of mischief,” the farmer had said to the squire, his tone smooth and humble; and the latter had nodded assent. Then laying his mighty hand upon the lad’s shoulder, and forcing the lowering, averted eyes to meet his, had told him that John Rawdon the schoolmaster had done his simple duty, and he (James Bates) need no longer owe him a grudge, for he had as good an opening as any young man could wish for. He had now a chance of redeeming the past, and proving to his employer that he had not done wrong in taking him without a character. “And remember, boy,” he had added, in conclusion, “if ever you get into trouble, or have anything on your mind, come at once to me. I wish all those who work, not under, but with, me, to look upon me as a friend.”

It was by such words as these that the

proud master of Treherne won the hearts of the people. Condescension in the great is so easy and so effective. And thus John Rawdon, thanks to the generous support of his patron, was allowed to retain his situation.

One evening Squire Treherne turned in at the school-house gate. As he was passing that way, he thought he might as well go in and relieve John's mind, and lay down at the same time some practical rules for his future conduct. He quite believed that the poor fellow had woefully mismanaged his affairs, and that he needed a strong mind, as well as a powerful hand, to help him. There are those who can give sound practical advice upon all subjects, even the subjects with which they are least familiar. It is an individual talent.

John Rawdon tried hard to feel and express himself grateful. He looked up wistfully into the stern, thoughtful face, and admiring, almost reverencing, the strong, noble-hearted man as he did, and had done

from his childhood, he wished—oh, how he wished!—that there might be something besides the giving and receiving of favours—some chord of sympathy, some touch of gentler, kinder feeling between them.

He perfectly agreed in all his patron said. Was it not what he had said to himself again and again? But then, it is so easy to reason where you do not feel, so hard to reason where you do.

“You are not well, John,” the squire said at last, struck by his look, his attitude, his more than usually faint and stammering words.

John Rawdon had not been well for weeks past; but now he actually suffered, though in silence. Such confused, nervous, wretched days, such sleepless, or vision-haunted nights! The effort he made to hide what he felt from Agatha, who was herself so fragile, and so easily frightened, obliged him to give way more completely when alone. The squire had found him cowering over the fire, though it was a

bright, still summer evening, trembling, shivering, shrinking from the draught that came in freely through the closed window and door, and down the chimney.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Rawdon. All this worry is too much for you; you have not health for it; you take things too much to heart. I thought the place would suit you exactly, and be easy and congenial; but I’m not at all sure that you would not be better out of it, after all.”

John Rawdon looked quickly up, a world of passionate pleading in the blue sunken eyes. “Take me out of it. Find some other work for me—work that would be more worthy of me—less hard, less intolerable!” That was the cry of his heart, but Carlton Treherne could not hear it; and he went away, convinced that he had done all that lay in his power to help the man who could not help himself. If he was unfit to be the village schoolmaster, for what else could he be fit!

John Rawdon, left to himself, shivered

and shook more convulsively than before. He tried to think that the news he had heard was good news; but thinking had become too great an effort.

When Agatha came in she heard him talking to himself with rapid, passionate, though subdued, utterance. When she came and stood beside him he looked up at her from where he sat cowering over the fire, and faintly smiled. "Agatha," he murmured, in a soft, absent tone, as one might speak in a dream, and he put out his hand to touch her.

That was the last conscious touch and word and look the poor little wife was to have for many a day.

The squire, having relieved John Rawdon's mind, as he thought, turned in at the park gate—the same gate at which Agatha had watched him stand and talk with Rachel—and took the public path. Coming along that path, whom should he meet but Mr. and Mrs. Lane!

For the last nine months he had certainly

avoided them—not intentionally, perhaps; instinctively, rather. He had not forgotten Rachel Raye, her eyes, her hair, her winsome ways and pleasant laugh, or the trick she had played him. It could not be said that he regretted her. He would hardly have known what to do with her now had he got her. She had indignantly refused to be treated as a plaything, and for what else was she fit? Still, he had not forgotten her, though he had tried hard to do so, and had therefore no wish to be reminded of her now.

Mrs. Lane, who was the least tetchy and most forgiving creature in the world, was all smiles and delight at the accidental *rencontre*. She hardly knew how to make the most of it, and behaved altogether as if it had been some marked and particular favour that had been conferred upon her.

She had it all her own way. There was no proud, high-spirited little niece to pout and flash out upon her for saying too much. She hoped he was well, and had been well.

ever since they had last met. She further hoped he would excuse the liberty she took in congratulating him upon his engagement, which must be a subject for universal rejoicing.

The master of Treherne turned rather restive before she had done. He would have shaken hands and passed on, but she was evidently loath to part with him before she had unburdened her mind of all that had been on it since their last meeting. She turned, therefore, and kept at his side.

Almost as proudly as if she had been his own mother, she told him how sure all Didford made of his success at the approaching election. Who could stand against *him*, indeed? "And to be sure, Mr. Carlton," added the good prosy old soul, "it will be a pleasure for your friends to have you in the House, and read your speeches in the papers—and very fine ones you'll make, I know. It would have been a proud day for Mrs. Treherne had she lived to see it. Dear, dear, how time does fly,

to be sure! But I dare say the future Mrs. Treherne——”

To change the subject—for though he considered Mrs. Lane a very worthy creature, he cared little for what she might have to say about his political career or the “future Mrs. Treherne”—he asked after Toby, whose size and laziness had amused him from his boyhood upwards.

It was very condescending in him to remember Toby, and his extreme condescension encouraged his companion to mention some one whom it might also please him to remember.

“My niece Rachel, Mr. Treherne—you may remember. She was here last year——”

“What of her?” and the squire faced round so sharply upon the speaker that, disconcerted rather, she drew back a step.

What he expected to hear was that Miss Ray, like himself, was going to be married. Why he should mind hearing this, or should look as he did at the mere suspicion of such

a thing, was what some may understand, but none could explain.

The good aunt, however, had only a simple, commonplace message to deliver, nothing more. Her niece Rachel, having heard of Mr. Treherne's engagement, begged to offer her congratulations, and wished him all happiness.

Rachel's words had not said this exactly, or meant it either ; but this Christian interpretation having been given to them by her excellent relative, it was in this mild matter-of-fact form they reached Carlton Treherne.

"I hope Miss Raye is well. Will you thank her from me when you write?" was the cold, careless answer ; and this time he positively stopped short, shook hands, and passed on alone.

He found letters awaiting him ; most of them were on business, but there was a love-letter—a real love-letter among them. Evelyn's letters were pleasant ones to receive—so fond, so flattering, so much more

demonstrative than her looks and words. The perfumed note-paper, the delicate characters, the soft, maidenly expressions of regard, wherein affection and veneration blended so prettily that they could not fail to soothe and gratify.

“ We are all so proud of you ”—thus ran the third page—“ I and papa, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Everybody says you will be one of the great leading men of the day. And they hope that when you are once in the House we shall spend at least half the year in London. Lord B—— wants you to take his house. He says it would suit us exactly. It has stables, and such fine reception-rooms.”

Carlton Treherne paused awhile here, and smiled. In the summary of Evelyn Graham's desirable qualities he had often dwelt upon the placid turn of her mind, which would spare him all caprice and exactions. “ She will not make an exacting wife, at least,” he had said again and again, as we know. An exacting *wife*—no, certainly not ;

he said that still. But as mistress of Treherne, he began to suspect her of being capable of exactions, after all; and the idea amused him. As M.P., he must have his town house, and why not Lord B——'s as well as any other? Evelyn would make the most of any house he might give her. She would receive and do things in style, and be perfectly unexceptionable. He could trust all such matters to her; and this, for a rising man who was to be so much before the world, the great world and the fashionable, was an important point gained. As to the means, he thought, not without a thrill of pride, of all he had done and was still doing. Not an acre of the old place that had, as it were, dozed through successive ages, but should be made to yield to the uttermost. Then there were the Works, that had been such a losing concern in his father's time. If he had done much for them, how much more had they done for him! Not a single improvement, for one and all of which he had been so cried up, but had been for his

own advantage in the end. The workmen were well paid and well housed, it is true, and had therefore every reason to congratulate themselves; but so also had the master. For though he reckoned very much upon birth and brains to get him on in the world, he fully appreciated the value of the baser coin with which the great unsightly building—always such an eyesore to the late squire's fastidious taste—provided him.

Pondering over the prettily written love-letter with a smile, Carlton Treherne decided that Evelyn should have a town house—one with stables and reception-rooms, too, if she pleased; and this, not to gratify the girl's fancy, but to secure the wife's position. Then he went on reading.

“I had such a long talk with the Duke of ——, the other evening. He is such an admirer of yours—quite enthusiastic, I assure you. He heard your speech, you know, and prophesies for you great things. All our friends count upon your gaining the election. Papa is as proud of you as I am.

He told the duke he would have given me to you had you possessed neither name nor fortune you were such a favourite of his."

Again Carlton Treherne paused over the letter, and this time fairly laughed. The baronet setting up for disinterested affection! which affection he had no doubt proved by the generous surrender of his only child! That he might have been more generous in the matter of her dower was unquestionably true; but, then, too much should not be expected of weak human nature, and the one sacrifice was as much as could be reasonably expected of him, under the circumstances.

Carlton Treherne, who was naturally generous, was satisfied; only he laughed at the baronet's effective way of putting things.

Evelyn's letter contained many more pretty, flattering speeches, forgotten as soon as read; but what Carlton Treherne did not so soon forget was the remark of the duke, and the assurance of the general confidence he already inspired among those of his own party and his own set.

Repeatedly, in public as in private, he had declared that he valued every man's opinion alike; that he would be as proud of the good word of the meanest labourer on his estate, the poorest *hand* in his Works, as of that of the noblest peer of the realm; and he was looked up to as the soul of blunt, unvarnished truth, and honestly himself believed that he never said a word more than he really meant. Why, then, did he feel so indifferent when good Mrs. Lane told him of the opinion in which he was held by all Didford, and of what old Snipe the apothecary and young Swithers the lawyer had said in particular—and so pleasantly elated at a complimentary mention of him by the Duke of ——?

Words and feelings, opinions and impulses, will they ever so long as the world exists, and its conflicting passions, mean one and the same thing?

CHAPTER XII.

THE casual meeting with "Mr. Carlton" had left good Mrs. Lane quite elated. Why it should have done so, and what had been the personal advantage derived therefrom, are questions we may ask, but she never would. It was a feeling, perhaps, more than anything else—a feeling that had sprung up from the moment the beautiful, proud, blue-eyed Mrs. Treherne, then only a bride like herself, had deigned to smile upon and notice her. Smiles and notice had been gratefully accepted as favours from that day forth. Mrs. Treherne dead and buried and almost forgotten, upon Mr. Carlton, as her son, and master of Treherne, had descended the eager homage of the

worthy soul in whom the bump of veneration must have been developed to a wonderful degree.

“I hope he did not mind my recalling our Rachel to him,” she observed, as in a pleasant flutter of agitation she plodded home on Uncle Joe’s arm.

Uncle Joe did not see why he should. The squire was a very fine fellow—that was certain; there was not a finer in the whole county round, and a very grand personage in *their* eyes, no doubt—but why should he mind receiving a polite message from their niece Rachel, who was a dear little girl, and as good and pretty as any lady in the land?

“If she is really coming to live amongst us—it will be her own fault now if she doesn’t—it would be a great thing for her to be noticed by the Trehernes.”

Uncle Joe here gave an expostulatory grunt, the only form of dissent upon which he ever ventured.

“Well, dear, and so it would. Not but

what the Barnetts are rising in the world, and are even now worth more than half the county families around, I dare say; so that our Rachel, as Harry's wife, will have as good a position, and as good a fortune, too, as any girl need wish for. But, then, to be noticed by the Trehernes!"

Uncle Joe, remembering Rachel's peculiar views on certain subjects, felt more than doubtful as to her grateful reception of the dreamed-of honour. He had at one time suspected her, it is true, of a fancy for the squire; but, then, besides being a very fine gentleman, he was also a very fine man—that magnificent presence, that tawny moustache, those grey, expressive eyes, might well take a girl's fancy!

"And you think she really likes the young fellow well enough to marry him?" he asked, after a pause, his tone a dubious one.

"Why, don't you remember how well they got on together?"

"Did they?" dubiously still. "Whenever

they got together they always seemed to fall out about one thing or another.”

“Which just proves their liking for each other. A young man and woman will never fall out each time they meet unless they are as fond of each other as can be.”

“And you say that he has written to her?”

“Not yet, though he’s in a great hurry to have it all settled; and he got his father to write to Mr. Raye. They were always afraid of Philip, you know, and found him a difficult person to deal with—so stiff and unbending; but as soon as they have his good word—and he’d never throw over such a chance for the girl—Harry will write and propose.”

Some time after this, it might have been a month or so, Rachel got a letter which caused her to start, open her eyes, and then burst out laughing, to the undisguised annoyance of Cousin Charlie, who, having constituted himself sole guardian of her every word, look, and thought, resented not

a little any stray glance or smile bestowed upon another. Moreover, she had done worse than laugh, she had also blushed, and the characters upon which her eyes rested were male characters, undoubtedly. He addressed her so as to attract her attention, but failed in his object. He twirled his moustache, bit his lip, and his countenance assumed a look of severity, as did also his tone. Addressed for the second time, she looked up, the laugh still in her eyes, but she answered absently. She was thinking of her letter, not of him.

“What was there in that letter to make you laugh?” he asked when, breakfast being over, they found themselves alone together. He quite believed that he had the right to question and cross-question her, and it amused her to let him think so.

“Would you not like to know!” was the saucy, and not very original, retort.

“*He* seems an amusing correspondent, at any rate.”

“Amusing!—it’s simply absurd;” and

again she laughed, which exasperated the lieutenant, and made him look quite fierce.

“Where are you going?” he cried, as she moved briskly to the door. As a rule, he could not bear her out of his sight; to allow her to escape in her present mood would be most injudicious—highly improper, in fact.

“There is medicine, and jelly, and a volume of sermons to be taken to the Payntons, who are half of them down with the fever.”

“But that’s a very long walk.”

“And therefore I wish to go. There are certain conditions of the mind when bodily exertion is an absolute necessity. Whenever I am very much excited, I must walk; a good race between my limbs and thoughts will exhaust and then quiet them sooner than anything else. You can’t think what a comfort it sometimes is to tire yourself out!”

Poor child!—that comfort had been hers at least, more than once. She was not speaking quite seriously now. All that she

said was true, but she said it rather to tease Cousin Charlie than with a view to a moral reflection.

She had not given up teasing, had Rachel Raye; on the contrary, it was the one occupation that still afforded her amusement, and which she still thought worth an exertion. It was no longer as the happy child, from sheer light-heartedness, that she played with those who were brought beneath her influence; she knew now that a feeling, a word even, will cause pain—seeing that a feeling, a few stray words, a look, had left her, for a time at least, nearly broken-hearted. Had it also left her for the rest of her life hard-hearted? She said to herself that she did not care—that it would be better, far better, if it were so. She could not do things by halves; and it was wrong, quite wrong and wicked and mad to love too much—to have your heart warm and aglow with a feeling that is all emotion and rapture and awe, so that in your whole life and being there is but room for love and

pity and adoration. Such a feeling she had known; but she could never know it again, and never wished to. So she teased Cousin Charlie whenever she got the chance, which was hourly. She was teasing him now. Her very attitude, the play of her lips, the laugh in her eyes, was in itself a challenge which—as he was feeling very jealous, very much aggrieved, and quite resolved not to lose sight of her in her present unsatisfactory mood, with that letter in her pocket, and that rebellious look curling the corners of her lips and lying beneath the light laugh in the farther depths of her brown eyes—he was not slow to accept.

“And in such seasons of peculiar excitement you do not, I hope, object to another pair of legs entering the race with you?”

“That quite depends. Sometimes I *must* be alone. For to-day——”

“Yes? To-day——”

“Well, there is a heavy basket to carry, and, as it looks like rain, an umbrella and waterproof.”

And Lieutenant Charles Wilkinson, the Ashantee hero, the mighty despot whose word was law, and who gave himself more airs than all the rest of Riverton put together, because feeling just then jealous, and quite determined not to lose sight of the girl in her present mood, meekly volunteered to take the entire charge of basket, umbrella, and waterproof, so that he might enjoy the privilege of walking at her side.

When Mrs. Wilkinson heard of the proposed walk, she threw up her hands, and her eyes too, towards heaven, which was looking threatening enough to cause her alarm. But she had another cause of anxiety besides the weather. Mothers' eyes see very far, and clearly; and Rachel and the handsome soldier son were too fond of each other, and too much together, to please her.

“You'll be wet through before you get back, and Charlie will catch his death of cold!”

Rachel laughed. That laugh never failed

to provoke the lieutenant, seeming to set him and all his fine soldierly airs at defiance. He resented it now, upon his mother ; and gave her such a look, and his moustache such a savage tug, that she at once subsided into silence, and retired to the nursery and the babies.

Through the village, and down the lane, and over the fields the cousins passed, and hardly a word had been exchanged. Either Rachel was perversely bent upon being uncompanionable, or her thoughts so entirely engrossed her, that Charlie's companionship was overlooked. It was not until they had well-nigh reached their destination that she slackened her pace, awoke to a consciousness of his presence, and shot up at him a quick, bright, appealing look.

He met it, but was feeling too sulky and too much aggrieved to return it. Ever since they started he had been watching for a conscious word or smile, and had made repeated efforts to obtain one ; but failing, had turned sulky. His thoughts, mean-

while, were troubled. Father and mother had both spoken, more than once, of a change in the girl since her visit to Didford, and had even hinted at a love affair as the only way of accounting for it. The mysterious letter bore the Didford post-mark—that he had noticed when passing it to her; and that same letter, together with the doubts it awakened, had caused a sudden and violent transition in his feelings which, from light and self-satisfied, had all at once grown serious and uneasy. He had appeared at the breakfast-table calm and refreshed, with no greater interest or anxiety than centred in the columns of the *Times*, the post-bag, and Cousin Rachel's ever ready smiles. Now he walked beside her with throbbing pulse and heart. In the last few hours his feelings had reached a climax, and if given expression to he would be for ever lost to celibacy and freedom. No wonder, then, that his thoughts were troubled.

Rachel, looking up into the fair, hand-

some face, and catching its rather peculiar expression, burst out laughing; but at the same time, as if to make amends, she took his arm and pressed up to him in quite a coaxing, cousinly way.

“Don’t be vexed, Charlie”—for he did look very vexed—“but I really can’t help laughing. It does look so odd to see you carrying that big kitchen-basket and the waterproof and umbrella as meekly as if you were Mr. Emerson, the curate, who was never so happy as when I made of him a beast of burden; and all the time you look as fierce and stormy as if you were charging at the head of a regiment. Of what have you been thinking all this time?”

“Of what have *you* been thinking, Rachel?” retorted the lieutenant, his voice less steady than it would have been if commanding the said gallant, but imaginary, charge.

Rachel, by way of answer perhaps, slipped her disengaged hand into her pocket, and into it ran the sharp edge of a substantial,

official-looking envelope that lay there. Charlie, who was all eyes just then, saw the involuntary movement, and gave the kitchen-basket a violent jerk, which produced a mysterious expostulatory rattle from within.

“That letter again!” he muttered savagely. “It must be an important one indeed, to engross your attention so exclusively.”

And Rachel, growing all at once very grave, and turning on him her great eyes, wide open and wistful, said, a little below her breath, that “it was very important, very important indeed, and it was very wrong of her to laugh and make so light of it.” An] answer that was hardly calculated to allay her cousin’s suspicious irritation.

But they had reached the cottage, when she very considerately gave him the choice of remaining in a small and remarkably dirty yard, consisting exclusively of a pigsty and a stagnant duck-pond, with a wretched, inhospitable cur barking frantic-

ally and persistently at his heels, or of penetrating with her the uncertain depths of a passage from which light and air had been almost totally excluded, and at the further end of which, the rooms being occupied by the fever patients, she engaged in what seemed to him an interminable conversation with a large, untidy-looking female, who, after apologizing for, and thus drawing attention to, the dirt of her apron, proceeded forthwith to put it to a multiplicity of uses, making it serve alternately as towel, handkerchief, brush, until, having rolled tightly up in it her large, bare arms, to Lieutenant Charles Wilkinson's infinite relief, they and it ceased to move, and therefore to excite his wrathful indignation.

CHAPTER XIII.

“How nice to be in the open air once more!” cried Rachel with a contented sigh, as, the conversation having come to an end at last—as must all earthly things in time—she and Charlie turned into a field still laden with the perfume of the hay that stood around in cocks. “But I am very glad that I went.”

“And have got away. How can people live in such holes!”

Charlie’s voice was more indignant than compassionate. He had resented the foul air of the passage, and the dirt of the stout female’s arms and apron; indeed, he was resenting it still.

“Yes, how *can* they live, poor creatures!

I have often asked myself that question. Isn't it dreadful, Charlie! Nothing but hard work and dirt and misery. How *can* they live!"

"Because, when left to our natural state, we are just animals and nothing more. Dirt is as much a part of themselves and their natural existence as it is to any other animal—the much maligned occupant of the sty not excepted."

Rachel was inhaling the rich perfume of the hay, and looking around and above her, her heart was full. "How grateful we should be for our life, such as it is; for all that makes it beautiful, instead of loathsome and unsightly." And again she sighed, but remorsefully this time, remembering how ungrateful she had once been; how she had gone near to break her foolish heart over a [wild, impossible delusion, and had almost cursed the life from which the one thing only had been withheld. "Are we not very fortunate, Charlie? Should we not be very grateful?"

But Charlie was in no mood for moral reflections just then. He was in love with the girl at his side, and it was of her, as his love, that he was thinking. He had felt her hand steal under his arm. He had felt how, even whilst speaking, she had pressed closer to his side, as if in tacit acknowledgment that his companionship was one of the special blessings for which she had to be grateful. He had felt, too, that her eyes were searching his face, eloquent and warm and soft—so very soft. And, though but a few hours before he had thought himself quite safe, being, in his own estimation, far too brilliant a personage to be lightly bestowed upon any woman, he spoke for once as he felt, reckless of consequences. He had, it is true, dreamt of bestowing himself ultimately upon a fortune as brilliant, if possible, as his own personal merits; and it is thus he would have reasoned only a few hours since: “What adequate return could Cousin Rachel, pretty, brown-eyed, brown-headed Rachel make him for the generous

surrender of himself!" The question, however, that now trembled at his heart was of a different nature altogether.

"To have so many blessings and yet be so ungrateful," repeated Rachel; and softer yet grew both tone and look.

Then, up rose the fatal words from the soldier's heart to his lips, and he vowed eternal gratitude, both to Heaven and to her, if she would be his wife.

Startled rather, because so entirely unprepared, she hastily withdrew her hand from his arm, and her look from his face. "Another!" was her involuntary and rather strange exclamation. But he understood it perfectly.

"Then it's just as I suspected," growled he in jealous fury. "That letter was an offer of marriage, and that was why you got so excited over it."

She smiled a little at his vehemence. She herself was not *feeling*, not very much, at least; and so it could but amuse her after all. Perhaps she was not sorry that he had

spoken. It was really very kind and condescending of him to care for her; and why should she be frightened of his love, or of him either—dear, handsome Cousin Charlie! More coaxingly even than before her hand stole to its old resting-place, and she nestled up to him.

“Well, Charlie, I don’t mind telling you. It was an offer—a very good one, people would say, no doubt. Aunt Mary did, and so would papa and uncle and Aunt Julia. But you won’t say so, Charlie, I know; and so I would much rather talk it over with you than with uncle and aunt, who are so very different from us, you know, and must have quite forgotten what it is to be young and have feelings.”

It struck Lieutenant Wilkinson as strange and unpleasant that the girl should talk thus calmly and dispassionately, having just received an offer of marriage from himself. But the fact was that, having received two offers that same day, the one rather interfered with the due appreciation and import-

ance of the other. As she pressed his arm so affectionately, and so sweetly volunteered her confidence, his indignant aside was, "What the deuce does she mean by thinking or talking, at such a moment, of any one but *me*, or of anything but the offer I have just made her!"

"Well?" this aloud, and dryly, finding that she had come to a standstill. But she was quite ready to start afresh at a word of encouragement.

"It is such an absurd letter; so dreadfully commercial. £ *s. d.* made the most of—made to look as tempting as possible—quite irresistible, in fact. I hate such things. And the worst of it is"—here the brown eyes began to flash, and the red lips to quiver—"that they actually wrote to papa before they wrote to me, taking my consent as a matter of course—coming between us, which no one ever dared to do before, and making me so ridiculous in his eyes."

"You don't care for the young man, I suppose?" the lieutenant observed loftily,

growing bolder, and more confident in look and tone, as the fever of jealousy subsided.

“Not particularly. He was better than nothing; but he was too good-natured, too amiable, you know. He made too much of me, and made me think too well of myself to allow of my thinking very well of him.”

Now, Charlie, whatever might be the warmth and impetuosity of his feeling, never for a moment forgot himself. He might admire and love a pretty woman, but he admired and loved himself supremely above all. He could smile contemptuously, therefore, at another's folly, and feel that in that respect, at least, he was superior.

“Commercial men are not attractive as a rule; they have seldom anything to recommend them but their money.” This in the grand, supercilious tone in which every subject above, beyond, or beneath him, was by him discussed.

It would have been more generous of Rachel, had she stood up for the absent lover—so true, and at times so useful—who had

often come in so opportunely to vary the lonely monotonous of her Sunday afternoons, and who had but erred, fond, foolish youth, on the side of devotion. But she did no such thing; she only laughed a little, and joined in, slightly.

“Oh, Aunt Mary found him very attractive; quite irresistible. But, then, she has a particular fancy for plump young men—many elderly ladies have. Unfortunately, I had always rather a prejudice against them, and against sandy hair, and a moustache that neither faith nor pomatum will ever induce to grow, and which the owner has not the moral courage to shave off. There is no occasion to grow one at all; but there is always something contemptible in a deficiency of any kind.”

Charlie ran his fingers through his hair, which was of a beautiful and decided brown, and stroked his moustache, which was simply luxuriant. In that respect, too, he was superior—infinately superior. Altogether, now that he had got rid of his jealous fears

and the kitchen-basket, he felt himself once more—his handsome, bold, conceited, self-sufficient self. He was very anxious to turn the girl's thoughts from her past to her present lover, to make his feelings, instead of hers, the topic of conversation; but he hardly knew how to manage it. She was so taken up with poor Harry—his absurd pretensions, the wrong he had done her in making those pretensions public, coming between her and the absent father, who was all that she now had in the wide world to love and look up to, to dream of, and hope in—that, talkative, she was quite as inaccessible as she had been when silent. At last the subject seemed to have exhausted itself, and with flushed cheeks and pouting lips, and eyes flashing still, and moist, and indignant, she looked up for sympathy. She got more than that; for, finding the temptation quite irresistible, Charlie suddenly flung his arm about her and got her to him.

“Come, Rachel, don't think any more

of that other fellow—he's not worth making a fuss about; but look at me, and answer my question. No, no, you shan't escape me now. I will have an answer. Shall I write to uncle, or will you, or shall we both write? He won't mind your marrying me, I know. I was always rather a favourite of his, and a gentlemanly profession is worth a few paltry thousands scraped together in trade, I should think."

Rachel had managed to extricate herself from the uncomfortable embrace, and once more she was struck by the absurd, rather than the sentimental, side of the question. What would Uncle Charles and Aunt Julia say? "Oh, Charlie!" she burst out, "what would every one say? It seems even more absurd than marrying poor Harry. What would you do with me, or I with you? What should we have to live upon?"

Charlie honestly allowed that they would not have very much. At present he had nothing to speak of in the way of a fortune—a couple of pounds in his pocket,

and a couple of hundreds' worth of debts. But the governor must come down if he married, and so must Mr. Raye, who was a man of capital, and much richer than any one supposed. Whereupon Rachel indignantly declared that she would never ask poor papa for a penny of his money, all of which he was spending upon the big, ugly machine, of which he was so fond.


“Well, then, I'll marry you without a penny!” cried the gallant young officer, who was at the moment all warmth and fervour—which fervour rather disconcerted Rachel, who, seeing that the situation was critical, became anxious to effect an escape.

“If you can catch me,” she cried, seized with a bright idea; “but it's going to rain, and I mean to run all the way home,” this with a saucy look thrown back at him as she set off running. But the stile gained, she paused. He was carrying her waterproof, and she could not get on without *that*, however well she might contrive to get on without *him*, both then and through

life. He was, therefore, allowed to come up, and even to help her on with the Ulster; and standing thus close, the little gipsy face, flushed with health and exercise and excitement, brought, for the first time perhaps, on a direct level with his own, as she stood on the lower step of the stile, it was but natural that, considering their cousinship, the warmth of his feelings, and the generous surrender he had made of himself, his merits, and his debts, he should, whilst hooking the cloak about the slender throat, hook his warrior arm about it too, and bring the luxuriant moustache to within an inch of the red lips just parting afresh to speak—to within an inch, but no further; that, the outstretched hands and scared white face, bent hastily aside, forbade.


Cousin Charlie drew back confusedly; he had not been prepared for so decided a repulse. If Rachel had never yet accepted a kiss, she had given more than one. On his return home, as the interesting copper-coloured invalid, she had actually thrown

her arms round his neck, so glad was she, and sorry, and affected; and again, when the beautiful gold ornaments had been brought out and presented, and a kiss laughingly begged for in return, it had been freely given. But now that he spoke of love, that he had asked her to marry him—she gave a low cry, and for one brief moment covered her face with her hands. For vividly there had risen up before her the memory of another day and another scene therewith connected. A solemn, hueless sky, such as hung over their heads now; just such a great expectant silence as now reigning around; a strong mesmeric clasp closing her about; lips bending slowly downwards and drawing hers to meet them; grey, deep, passionate eyes looking into hers. It was seldom, very seldom, such thoughts now troubled her. Returning home after that long day of solitude and fasting, she had said that the struggle was over, and every succeeding day but served to convince her that what she had said was true.



It was the story of King David over again, repeated, as it is, daily, hourly. While there is yet hope there are tears, and prayers, and longings, and passionate clingsings; that gone, and broken hearts being, as we are told, a fallacy, we arise from the earth, and anoint ourselves, and change our mourning-apparel, and begin life, as it were, afresh. Carlton Treherne, as a solitary figure, wandering alone through the grand stately silence of his home, or beneath the grand, stately shadow of his park trees, would have haunted Rachel for life; but wandering there with his handsome, cold, uninteresting cousin, the vision ceased to be attractive—became, in fact, quite poor and commonplace. She dreamt of him no more; and if she regretted anything, it was no longer his love, but his fortune, his position—in short, all the good things which another woman saw to prize in him.

Splash—splash—down came the rain; but Rachel was well wrapped up in the waterproof, and Charlie was holding the umbrella over her.



As they walked along he entered more fully upon the subject of his feelings and prospects, enlarging upon the peculiar advantages and delights of camp and barrack life. "The very life to suit Rachel, who liked change and excitement, and didn't mind roughing it."

"There was that fellow Rawlinson who brought out his wife—not half such a pretty girl as you; and you should just have seen what a fuss all the other fellows made about her. It was as much as he could do to keep her to himself. Her horse, and carriage, and chair, were always surrounded. It was enough to turn any woman's head. And wouldn't you enjoy the balls!"

"Oh yes; I daresay they would be great fun, and it would be very nice to be made a fuss about; but—but——"

"But what, Rachel?" tenderly and encouragingly.

"I'm getting so wet, Charlie."

"So wet! Why, I've been holding the umbrella over you all the time."

“Yes, that’s just it, and the wet is streaming in a shower from the umbrella down my neck. I never did believe that two could walk under one umbrella—comfortably.”

Here was a damper! What lover’s ardour could stand it? Even the lieutenant, skilled as he was in such matters, did not quite see how the conversation could be gracefully and speedily turned from a dripping umbrella to lovers’ vows. She had not refused, but neither had she accepted, him, and her conduct had throughout been anything but satisfactory. He must have an answer, and they were already at the garden-gate. He made one last gallant charge, dispensing with grace for the sake of speed; and the answer he got, as she skipped away from the dripping waterproof, leaving it in his hands at the hall door, was—

“Let me dispose of poor Harry first, Charlie. I can’t do two things at once. I never could.”

“What does she mean?” snarled the irritated officer, as he kicked far from him his wet boots, revenging on them, as many a better man has done before him, the slight offered to his pride by woman. “It’s that absurd letter has turned her head! She may laugh at the fellow and his offer, but she’s as proud of it as ever she can be. All women are alike! I almost wish I had not spoken. What a fool I was!”

“Well, and why not?” Rachel was saying to herself at the same time, as she loosened and opened the long, brown, beautiful plaits, of which, however, she was no longer as proud as she used to be, which she no longer held clasped to her bosom beneath the hot, folded hands as she lay wakeful, yet dreaming—dreaming in the little white bed. “Why not?” she repeated impatiently, as if arguing a disputed point. “It will certainly end so; real love stories always do. And why not Charlie as well as any one else—or better? He is handsome, and kind, and generous, and everybody

thinks so much of him. I don't think I do, somehow; but I'm very fond of him. I know him better than any one else, and like him better, too—a thousand times better than Henry Barnett, though he can't boast, poor fellow, of his prospects and his present income. But, then, he hasn't vulgar relations; and I can't do anything I please with him, as I could with the other one. I should never have thought of him if he had not thought of me. But I can quite well picture myself his wife; and so, of course, it will be. It seems too natural and commonplace not to become a fact."

A pause, as she shook out the loosened ends that had suffered from the drippings of the umbrella.

"Papa will think us very foolish, but he won't positively object, I fancy. And he shan't give a farthing away from the big, horrid machine that he loves better than me. Perhaps Charlie's parents may object; but if not, he will take me out to India. And I can picture my life there too. His

fellow officers will make a good deal of me, as he says. Most men take to me just at first, and they'll all be glad enough of any woman to make a fool of. I shall allow myself to be made a fool of; most women who are popular with men do. I shall allow them to admire and make much of me, and I shall laugh with and at them, and grow, perhaps, what people call *fast*. Why shouldn't I? I'm no better than others. I shall enjoy the balls and the life altogether, no doubt; and often feel very much ashamed of myself and of handsome Cousin Charlie—he will be my husband then—too. And either I shall die of the climate, or I shall grow old before my time, and lose all my pretty hair, and teeth, and liveliness—the only things that people can see to care for in me—and then—and then——”

But what woman cares to take more than one forward step into the future where youth and good looks and the favour of mankind are not?

As Rachel entered the drawing-room she glanced round it in search of Charlie. He was not there.

“Were you looking for anything, my dear?” the rector observed, drowsily.

“Oh, no—I—— Have the afternoon letters come? Ah, yes. I see aunt has got one——”

“From Didford—from Aunt Mary.” Mrs. Wilkinson spoke excitedly.

Rachel coloured violently, and her heart beat, oh, so fast!

“Such a piece of news! A most extraordinary thing, to be sure! What do you think? You knew Mr. Treherne, I think you said?”

CHAPTER XIV.

DIDFORD was full of the election; all Didford talked of it. It was not the only thing of which it talked; each found for himself some personal and more interesting topic still. Uncle Joe talked of his trees and flowers; Aunt Mary of her poultry and preserves; Mr. Barnett of the money-market; his son of Rachel. But whenever friend met friend, and all personal and therefore most interesting subjects had been discussed, they never failed to wind up with the election. All Didford said that the Liberal member would gain the day, and he said so himself, to himself.

Squire Treherne was now more than ever immersed in politics. The coming struggle

took up much of his time and thoughts. He had again been up in London, and had there enjoyed the privilege of an interview with most of the leading magnates of his party, and had contrived to see as much of Evelyn as was compatible with his other and more pressing engagements. It was pleasant to be so sweetly smiled upon; to feel that in the eyes of the woman who was to be his wife he was quite as important a personage as he was to his constituents or tenants. She humoured him in everything, even to the sacrifice of her own feelings; for when she found him wholly unsympathetic in the matter of wedding preparations, when she saw that the most graphic account of an important interview with milliner or dressmaker only bored him, she held her tongue and kept silence on the, to her, all-engrossing subject; contenting herself, and him, with the sweet and inoffensive smile that testified at once to her love and her submission.

It was the trousseau business that was

still keeping her in town, though the season was over. She was not looking her best—pale, and heavy and black under the eyes. Her lover suggested a return to Didford. He even said “it would be very pleasant to have her there;” and again she smiled, then sighed. “Pleasure must give way to business,” was her sober objection. So she stayed on in London, and the squire returned to Treherne. Each had important business on hand—a trousseau! an election! Each had to see the ambitious dream of a lifetime carried out; each looked forward confidently to the moment when that life might be said to have begun—the life for which they believed themselves so eminently fitted.

It is gratifying to know, when yourself so anxious for success, that others share to a certain degree in that anxiety; that it is a matter of public interest, and that a shout from many hearts as well as lungs will hail your hour of triumph. There is something both exciting and ennobling in the thought.

It seems to exalt a mere selfish passion into something lofty and grand. For is not every form of ambition, however high-sounding its name, mere selfishness, after all, having self and self-aggrandizement for its object? You may say that your wish to rise in the world is the noble wish to benefit mankind more effectually; but is that not a delusion?

Carlton Treherne said nothing. He was ready, nay eager, to devote his life to the public good, and show *what a Treherne could do*; but whether the motive power was pride or philanthropy he did not stop to inquire.

“All Didford is saying that you’ll gain the election, Master Carlton; they already look upon you as in,” was the remark of old Mann the steward, as he made his appearance in the study the evening of his master’s return. The broad breast of that master heaved, and his head erected itself just a little. He quite thought as did all Didford. He knew that his chances were good.

The business that had brought Mann there was gone into, many things arranged, and, as he gathered up his papers and rose to go, he added—"And if you please, sir, Mr. Fenham, the lawyer, has been here once or twice wanting to see you, sir. He seemed anxious to know when you returned, and said he'd call to-morrow."

The squire frowned and drew himself up.

"And, sir—I thought you mightn't know—poor Mr. Rawdon has been so ill this long time."

"A fever, wasn't it? But he is better—so I heard."

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure. The doctor doesn't seem to think over well of him. The fever's gone, but he doesn't seem to mend."

"I'll call and inquire after him."

The steward gone, the master of Treherne pondered over all he had heard; disposed of the business first, and then remembered the schoolmaster.

It was in the solemn hush of the evening

—such a glorious summer evening—that he walked across the park to the school-house. His way lay along the avenue of giant oaks, of which successive generations of Trehernes had been proud; overhead their mighty branches waved and tossed and whispered strangely; at his feet their fantastic shadows moved and crept noiselessly about him like living, longing things. He noticed the beauty of the evening, he watched the shadows around, and heard the whisperings above him. He walked slowly, and the great, busy, restless heart beat for once with quiet, even throbbings.

When he reached the school-house garden gate, and looked over it, he was at once struck by the silent and deserted air of the place. All that had been so bright and trim now so neglected. The windows stood open, and at the open door he paused again. Silence within as without, and apparent emptiness and desertion. It was as if the hand of death, and not of sickness only, had passed over it and hushed it into eternal silence.

His hand on the bell, the squire hesitated, as we hesitate instinctively to raise our voice beside the open coffin. He had come there confidently enough, aware of his own powers of usefulness, perfectly aware, too, that there were but few cases in which he could not offer both help and consolation. Here, however, on the silent threshold, that confidence had suddenly deserted him. He had often before come to John Rawdon's home as the master and the patron; but had he the right to come to him at such a moment as his friend? A sudden conviction told him that something had been wanting on his part. John had been his schoolfellow, his playfellow, his *protégé*. Had he been, could he ever be, anything more? He felt really sorry for him now, and for his poor little wife.

He had got thus far when the poor little wife was seen coming swiftly and noiselessly down the steep, creaking stairs. Not the faintest smile of welcome, not even a word of greeting as she stood before him, her

eyes uplifted to his, coldly and fixedly, as they had never been before, with a blank, frozen gaze. She did not give him her hand, but he took it, and held it closely in his, feeling so very sorry for her.

“I did not know that John had been so ill. I was away, you know, and only returned yesterday.”

He had quite dropped his usual imperious tone, and spoke very softly, as he always did speak to the little woman, from the day he had first looked into the shy, trusting eyes. She was his little love then. She was nothing to him now. Nothing was left of the old warm feeling but pity. Lonely watchings and fastings and tears are not conducive to beauty. Agatha was beautiful when he had first seen her, but there was nothing now for his fastidious gaze to rest upon. Hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, and parched, bloodless lips. Well may our copybooks tell us that beauty is fleeting. But what earthly gift is not? Wealth, success, love—dare we ever call them our

own, even for the few short years we need them ?

“I was so sorry to hear of John’s illness,” the man’s tone dropping into softness. “I came hoping I could be of use.”

“He has been so ill!” and the wife’s thoughts in the sick room, her voice was hard and dry as if with the effort to get out any articulate sounds.

“Would he like to see me ?”

“Thank you—I don’t know. We are always alone—he and I. No one ever comes near us.” And into the eyes, once so soft and maidenly, now hard and cold, came a wild, sudden look of horror, as if the utter loneliness of which she spoke had been a thing of fear.

When the squire repeated his question, she said that John was asleep. He had not slept all night, and she dare not wake him. And even as she spoke she turned from him and bent her head anxiously, as if listening.

Feeling more and more uncomfortable, he

promised to call again the next day. He promised also wine from his cellar, and jellies from his kitchen, and the best medical advice. If care and skill could save the life she so valued, it should, he said, a great pity in his heart and eyes.

Then for the first time something like hope and life kindled in the cold, dead face. She gave him a faint little smile, and her hand—thanked him, and wished him good-bye, and crept back again up the steep, creaking stairs, to John's room.

“I hope, for *her* sake, the poor fellow won't make a die of it. We must see what can be done.”

In pity for the woman he wished the man's life spared. That that life was individually worth saving he hardly thought. His was rather the stern philosophy of the Spartan. Poor, sickly, unpopular, and unfit for his work, or any other, what value could the lame schoolmaster's life be to him, or to any one else, except the weak, doting woman?

“It might be better, after all, to get some one else for the school, and find him work elsewhere. But for what is he fit?—what can he do? Perhaps, when I am in the House—he writes a good hand—I might make him of use.”

When John Rawdon awoke, Agatha told him that the squire had been there.

“Has he? How strange! And I was dreaming of him—such a curious dream, yet so real. I thought we had changed places, he and I. John Rawdon lay dead in the state-room at Treherne—Mrs. Treherne’s room that was—and I stood and looked at him as he lay, and wondered at the sad look in his face, as if there could be anything in the lost life to regret, so crippled and wasted, and useless.” This dreamily, as if speaking to himself.

“Oh, John,” Agatha interrupted him, “don’t speak so—don’t.” She was far too weary and broken for vehement protestations; but lying beside him on the bed, where she had thrown herself, in utter

weariness, she feebly encircled him with her arm.

“Why, child, it was only a dream—nothing more. It could never be reality. I wish it could.”

“You wish you could die and leave me?”

She quite believed it might be so. What was his life that he should hold it dear? The feeble arms tightened their weak, passionate clasp.

“What would you do if I were to die, Agatha?”

“Die too—at least, I hope so.”

He smiled. “I had a fever once before; poor grandfather nursed me through it. It would have been better if he had let me die then—long before I ever saw you, dear, or——”

But she would not hear what he had to say; and drawing the hand she had been holding all the time, closer still, pressing it to the bosom that seemed cold and dead to every other feeling but the one, she told

him that his love had been the joy and pride of her life, its greatest blessing. "That even if he had died in the fever, and left her to live on alone, she would still have thanked God who had let them be together for those few——" Then she paused. Could she say *happy* years, when talking of years so full of care and sickness, and pain and tears? She had known worse than all this—the fear of losing him! She had seen him, as she thought, dying, and had realized that want and care, physical agony, and the loss even of her babies, had been happiness to be grateful for; and as if that happiness were a thing too sacred almost for words, she repeated, in a hushed, awestruck tone, "I would have thanked God who let us be together those few happy years." Then the pale lips quivered, and she held them longingly up to his, and a great sigh broke from her heart, half rapture, half despair, as she felt his kiss fall softly upon them.

The next day the schoolmaster was up and seated in the big leathern chair, grand-

father's chair, which had been brought up for him from the kitchen, and placed by the window. He had taken some care with his dress, and so had Agatha. The beautiful hair had been combed and brushed, and made the most of—in his illness it had been allowed to grow long; and hanging redly warm and bright about his neck, now looked quite picturesque. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes shone, his lips smiled. He was expecting Carlton Treherne, and had resolved to open to him his heart.

But the squire did not call that day, or the next, or the next.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. FENHAM, the principal lawyer of Woolmaston, was one of the many who owed their fortune to the Trehernes. As a young man struggling with a large family, no means and no prospects, he had been taken up by the late Mrs. Treherne, who was rather fond of patronizing in a grand, easy way, and liked to feel that those in whom she was interested, or who could be useful to her, owed to her their prosperity; and as even when prosperous he still allowed himself to be patronized, was grateful to both patron and patroness, and at all times their humble, obedient servant, he won, and kept, their entire confidence. On certain occasions he would be invited to the

Park. At odd, irregular times, his bills, sent in with unvarying regularity, were paid; and, considerate as he was humble and grateful, he never pressed for payment, being blind indeed, in his loyal devotion, to the fact that they were quite as much his debtors, or rather more so, than he theirs.

Guy Treherne dead, Carlton Treherne in power, things had changed rather, and to the lawyer's advantage. The bills, still sent in regularly, were as regularly settled; he was more often invited to the Park, and still enjoyed the squire's confidence, until——

Well, Mr. Fenham was human, and—a lawyer; and are not lawyers proverbially exposed, and open, to temptation? He was tempted, and he fell. No doubt he had often been tempted, and had often fallen before; but so long as no one but himself knew it, it did not so very much matter. Unfortunately, however, certain things can't be kept as close as they should be, and the squire had seen good cause to withdraw both his confidence and connection; and

another struggling attorney, with a family and no means, whose fortune had to be made by patronage, greatly benefited by his disgrace.

It was to protest against this transfer, and try to right himself in the squire's eyes, that he had called at Treherne during the master's absence, and came again the day after that evening visit to the school-house.

Very humble he still was, and grateful and deprecating; not a shadow of the pompous defiance that might well have befitted the position that was secured, the fortune that was made. He could not have given himself airs in that house had he tried.

In quite an appealing tone he asked if Mr. Treherne was at home? With a look the reverse of bold or confident, he stepped into the library.

There was something ominous in his being shown in there, instead of into the study, where the squire received all those with whom he had business to transact, in

whom he felt confidence, or who were sufficiently intimate to be brought into closer contact. To all others was reserved the formality of an interview in the library. The family lawyer knew this, and *felt* it.

As the two men met face to face, the one face wore its most humble, the other its most uncompromising, look.

In the deep mullioned window where had once stood the great carved chair in which Rachel had sat and dreamt, now stood an official-looking table and two official-looking armchairs. Towards the one the lawyer was waved; beside the other stood the squire, his hand upon it. Another ominous sign this, showing that he had no intention to be sociable or prolong the interview. It did not look hopeful, certainly; but the lawyer had come there to be restored to favour, or—to be revenged. This he would never have confessed even to himself. That he could be suspected of a spirit of retaliation against one bearing the honoured name of Treherne, would have filled his feudal,

devoted soul with horror. Yet he had come there with a settled and ruthless purpose. He would have satisfaction one way or another. His rival should not, at least, enjoy the advantages that had once been his.

Afraid of himself, still more afraid of the man who had dealt so heavy a blow to the respectability of which he had for years made so fair a show before the world, that he had ended by almost believing in it himself—he had chosen darkness rather than light for the critical interview. He knew that he could not at once go back from it to the busy world—to his daily work, to his clerks, his office. He was not sure of himself, of what his feelings would be, when all should be over. He must put a long night of darkness and silence between the work on which he was now bent and that which made up his daily life. Doggedly bent upon being exonerated or revenged, he had yet an abject dread of the possible consequences; a sort of virtuous horror of

himself and his mission, as if the respected man of business seeking redress, and the humble *protégé* seeking revenge, were two distinct persons.

Very humble and inoffensive he looked as he dropped into the chair to which he had been haughtily waved.

“Your business?” was all the squire said in answer to his deprecating look.

He stammered out something about a mistake, a misrepresentation, his devotion to the family, the obligations he was under to them, the gratitude he owed and felt towards all bearing the name of Treherne.

To all this Carlton Treherne listened impatiently enough. The man had been trusted, and had betrayed the trust. With him words weighed but little compared with actions.

He slightly shifted his position, and expressed a polite regret that Mr. Fenham should have troubled himself to call. “There had been no mistake or misrepresentation, as he very well knew. He had

no doubt that Mr. Fenham had his reasons for acting as he had done, but he did not wish to enter upon the subject." Then, his eye chancing to fall upon the man's face, and seeing how terrible an earnest lay upon it—how white it was, and drawn, every feature strained upward to meet his and catch on it some sign of relenting, he stopped short. What could there be in his favour for its loss to call forth such a violent display of feeling? The man's position was secured—he was rich. Could the few extra hundreds that he grudged to another and a poorer man make it worth his while to cringe, and beg, and cut so sorry a figure?

The squire's face did show some sign of relenting, and it was seized upon with an avidity pitiful to see.

"Don't be hard upon me, Mr. Treherne. I have served your family faithfully for years. You had never any cause to complain of me before. Mrs. Treherne always treated and trusted me as a friend. And the late squire——"

Again Carlton Treherne shifted his position ; he was growing more and more impatient. "What did the fellow mean by dragging in his mother's name? She had helped and patronized and tolerated him, but as to treating him as a friend——"

The lawyer, his pale, anxious face still strained upward to meet that of the man who alone of all his dupes had found him out, and exposed him uncompromisingly and without a hearing, saw his last hope of escape, from himself and the dreadful retaliation upon which he was bent, but of the consequences of which he stood in such mortal dread—die out.

Any attempt at excuses or self-justification would, he felt, be a mere waste of breath. He could plead, and he could threaten. The grey, critical eyes were still fixed upon him ; he would have given much to escape from them and their owner, and the object of his visit. He half rose, then made a dive after his hat, which he had in the first instance placed carefully upon the

floor; but his hand not coming at once in contact with it, he lost heart, and resumed his seat.

“I bear you no ill will. I can't forget all I owe your family—the *Treherne* family; but my reputation is at stake. People are beginning to talk. You will do me a serious injury if you cease to employ me. Though I should be very sorry to injure you——”

“Injure *me!*”

“I would not be hard upon you. I can keep a secret as well as any man. I can't forget what I owe to the family, and you can, if you choose, secure my silence. The late Mr. Treherne——”

A slight shudder passed through the lawyer, and for the first time his look was withdrawn from the face that had grown too stern and unbending to allow of any hope of escape. The irrevocable step had been taken!

As his eyes dropped, those of the squire were raised involuntarily, and fell through

the open door of the picture-gallery upon the face of Guy Treherne—that strange, white, enigmatical face, upon which many could see no expression at all, and others saw so much. Large, blue, and prominent, the eyes met his, speaking as they had seemed to speak to the lame schoolmaster on that last visit he had paid to his patron's house. Now, too, as then, the evening shadows lay over it, flickering and uncertain, and, touched by them, the thin, cold lips seemed to part and quiver as with an effort to speak. It was a weak face and a sad, something of the lost buried life still living in the blue eyes, and looking out of them in pain and longing, when the heart, whose unrecognized passions had called forth the look, was at rest for ever in the coldness and silence of forgetfulness.

If Carlton Treherne had more than once looked up at the dead face with contempt, with what feelings would he regard it when the family lawyer had had his say, and his revenge!

CHAPTER XVI

“THE secret is all our own, yours and mine, and I don't see why it should not remain so. Not another living creature knows of it, or ever could suspect it.”

The grey eyes had long since returned to the speaker's face, which was not pale, but livid ; and the hand, one moment laid upon the table, trembled so violently that, ashamed of such an abject betrayal of weakness, he removed it. What he came there to say had been said ; but as, from first to last, Mr. Treherne had not uttered a word, and the dead silence that, together with the deepening twilight, had fallen over the room, had become unbearable, he talked on in a hoarse, dry, anxious voice, pausing every now and then to moisten his parched

lips, and wishing from the bottom of his heart, as he well knew he should, the night's work undone.

“I don't see what object would be gained by making the thing public. It was a mere chance that the secret did not die with Mr. Treherne. He confided it to me when he felt himself dying. You were away at the time, if you remember, and Mrs. Treherne too. He wrote to her, imploring her return ; but she was nursing you at the seaside, and would not leave you. When he found she did not arrive, his despair was dreadful ; and, having no one else at hand, he confided in me, giving me a sealed letter to be delivered into her hand, making me swear most solemnly not to open it upon any pretext. When I called the next morning, he seemed better. He had heard from Mrs. Treherne, and expected her home that same evening. I don't believe, had he seen her, that he would ever have had the courage to tell her the truth, for he was quite beside himself at the mere thought of what he had revealed ;

said that she would curse him in his grave ; bade me return him the letter, and made me swear once more that, living or dead, his secret should never be made known to her except with his consent. When I returned with the letter, an hour afterwards, Mr. Treherne was dead."

"And the letter?"

Carlton Treherne was now speaking for the first time, the words dropping from him as words will drop from us in a dream, awaking us with their sudden sharpness.

"I have it still, sealed, as it was delivered to me."

Again the dead silence, the ever-deepening twilight. Neither face could now be seen.

Mr. Fenham was trying hard to compose the blanched, quivering features, and restore sufficient moisture to the dry throat and lips to enable them to articulate. He was still possessed with the vague hope that, if only he went on talking, something would turn up to set matters right.

“ I should never have spoken as I have done had you not forced me to it ; and even now I have no wish to injure you—on the contrary. I have served the family for years, and I have kept your secret for years, and should have kept it to the end, but for that unfortunate misunderstanding. If you’ll let bygones be bygones, everything may yet be just as it was. I don’t myself see why one man shouldn’t do as well as another, as the rightful heir is dead, and the late squire left you the estate. Very soon you’ll be in the House, Mr. Treherne. Such a position is worth keeping, and I don’t see why you should lose it. No harm has been done as yet ; we are just where we were. You’re the master of Treherne, and you’ll marry Miss Graham ; and if you trust me as a friend, your secret is as safe with me as with yourself. As to the letter—— ”

Were these last words the only ones caught by the squire that he answered so quietly, turning back from the window

out of which he had for some time been looking?

“Yes, the letter. I must see it at once. I will drive back with you, Mr. Fenham.”

The lawyer jumped up with no little alacrity, and quite a jaunty air. The squire's perfect self-possession, his quiet tone and simple matter-of-fact remark, was a wonderful relief. “Surely,” he said to himself, “the bitterness of death is past. The man would be a fool indeed to give up such a position without a struggle. He'll keep it safe enough if he can but feel sure that he runs no risk. I would rather be his friend than his enemy; it would answer my purpose better, and I can't forget all I owe the family. He'll be a great man, every one knows that, and his interest will be worth the having. He must be persuaded to trust me; then all will be well.”

The drive was a very silent one. The subject that occupied them exclusively was not one to be discussed in the presence of a groom; and, moreover, the lawyer had

to give his undivided attention to the horse he was driving, which was young, restive, and not easily managed; and the squire was only too busy with his own thoughts. He was thinking deeply—this he realized; not so clearly did he realize that he was suffering, keenly, intensely, as he had never suffered in his life before. The death of his mother had been a terrible blow—radiant, smiling, apparently in perfect health one moment, lost to him for ever the next. He had said to himself that he would never get over it—perhaps in a certain way he never had; but how much easier is the irrevocable at all times to bear, than the hopeless struggle against fate!

Carlton Treherne acted and even thought like one in the full possession of his senses. He believed himself perfectly calm and collected, strong to face and defy the worst. Mr. Fenham had wondered at the extraordinary moral force that could meet such a blow without even giving a sign; but he could not see how hard the teeth were set,

how convulsively the right hand was clenched, how the great drops of agony stood out over the pale forehead. Carlton Treherne was not himself aware of these things. There is a depth of suffering too exceptional to be altogether realized.

Denser and denser over the giant trees of the park through which they were driving fell the cold night fog. Would the master of Treherne ever forget that drive, and the haunting horror that went along with him? "It was impossible, monstrous. The past a lie, the present exposure, the future a blank!" From time to time he caught the muffled clang of the horse's hoofs, the crack of the driver's whip; he even heard and quietly answered any casual remark addressed to him, and was more alive, perhaps, than usual to all outward impressions—to the cold driving of the mist against his face; to the faint, uncertain sounds, and faint, uncertain outlines that loomed here and there from out the grey depth of fog. And yet all the time he was thinking

deeply, and suffering keenly. If what the lawyer had said was true, monstrous and impossible as it seemed—if that sealed letter he was going to fetch were to prove it, beyond a doubt, what then? His life hitherto had been a monster imposition, and he himself the miserable dupe of one man's mad passion, of another man's cowardice. He, the master of Treherne—looked up to in the county as no other man was; the would-be member, whose boundless ambition and faith in himself and his future would have stopped short at nothing, as unattainable—now nameless, penniless, an impostor from his birth, would stand out before the world, not as Carlton Treherne, but as somebody else whose career had been a lie, and a delusion throughout.

It is terrible to be pursued in your thoughts by a ghastly nightmare which, intangible, takes full possession of you, can't be shaken off or got rid of, yet can't be calmly faced and reduced to reason; and collected as the master of Treherne fancied

himself to be, could he at that moment have seen the colour of his face and the look that lay upon it, it would have surprised and startled him somewhat.

They were driving through Woolmaston now. The old town, quiet and sleepy at all times, looked more dead than alive, wrapped in that grey mystery of fog. Here and there a light would gleam out, flicker, and vanish.

“Rather an ugly night this, and as obstinate a brute as ever I had to deal with. You’ll come in, won’t you?”

Not without difficulty and sundry muttered oaths, the lawyer had at last contrived to pull up at his own door. He was feeling anything but comfortable, shaky, and upset. Driving in that dense fog a young unmanageable horse was nervous work. What had gone before had been more nervous work still. He was cold and wet. A tumbler of hot grog would, he felt, be a comfort under the circumstances, if only his companion could be induced to keep him

company in a pleasant, neighbourly way. If only by giving up the letter, which he was glad enough to get rid of, and renewing the oath of allegiance and promise of secrecy, all could be amicably arranged, what a relief it would be! The responsibility of an important and guilty secret transferred from himself to another, and his influence over the master of Treherne and future M.P. secured for life. It would not be such a bad day's work after all!

"You'll come in, won't you, and take a glass of wine, or—a drop of something hot? It's cold work driving on such a night."

But the squire declined. He had come for the letter, and hot grog was not at all in his line.

"I will wait here while you fetch the letter. If you could drive me to the Treherne Arms I could get a fly from there. You will call upon me to-morrow at twelve."

The tone was the imperious one of the master and patron. Whatever lay in the future, it was his still to command. And

poor Mr. Fenham, no longer cheered by the vision of a steaming social glass, rubbed his hands despondently, fetched the letter, and drove the squire to the hotel.

“If you’d like me to keep you company till the fly comes round,” he mildly suggested, nervously anxious to return to the critical subject.

“Thank you, I wish to be alone.”

The squire entered the house. The lawyer turned his horse’s head, but the brute began to plunge and rear.

“Go to his head, and lead him out of the yard. He’ll be all right when on the high-road.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE fog, growing denser as night deepened, had not only wrapped the outer world in its deathly shroud, but had even penetrated into the room where Carlton Treherne sat. On the table, beneath his folded hands, lay the open letter that, destined never to meet the eyes of her for whom it had been written, had fallen in so strange a manner under his own.

It was not a long letter—a few wild, passionate, heart-broken lines, scarcely intelligible—a forced confession wrung from the man by the fear of death; his idolatrous love the one excuse for all.

“You never loved me, Katherine, but I could not bear that you should hate me.

Don't you remember how, the day before our baby was born, you told me that if you had a child unworthy of you, you would curse me? And when it was born, dead, and had been laid aside, you lost your head, and stretching out your arms for it, flung me from you, crying out that you knew how it would be—it was deformed, hideous, dead! I dare not show it you. That the curse of God was upon us both—upon you and me! And then the doctor held it up, and said it was as well it had not lived, for it was deformed! But still you raved; and they told me your life was in danger, unless you could have a living child to hold to your bosom. It was not I who first thought of deceiving you; but some one—the maid, I think—said there was a new-born baby at the lodge—a boy, too, but a few hours older than our own. And so, that you might live and not curse me for our misfortune, I had it brought and given to you; and you held it to your bosom and were saved. I did not mean to deceive you. I meant to tell you

the truth, but you took to it as if it had been your own, and were so proud and happy. I had never known you happy before, and I could not bear to grieve you. You boasted of its size and health and strength, till I dare not speak to you of the dead, deformed son, who had been yours as well as mine. I meant to tell you the truth, but I dared not! I knew that you would curse, hate, perhaps leave me, and I dared not!"

There was more than that in the letter—passionate jealousy of the low-born changeling, who was all to her that he, her husband, could never be, and who, even then, was keeping her from his death-bed. Passionate regrets, remorse, reproaches, wild cries for her return—for one kiss, one look, one word, the touch of her hand to give him courage to die, and leave her for ever.

As Carlton Treherne, not without an effort, removed his eyes from the last blotted words, he felt, for the first time in his life, perhaps, something that was not

contempt, that was deeper even than pity, for the man whose love for the beautiful, imperious woman he had called wife, and the low-born changeling, mother, had led to suffering that, to one of his proud, exclusive nature, must have been torture. To be obliged to treat and acknowledge as his son and heir the wretched alien he had himself brought into the house. To hear the noble mistress of Treherne boast, in her proud delight, of the size, the rude health and strength, of the peasant-born. To see the white, soft arms, for whose yearning clasp he had so often longed in vain, folded about the hated stranger, the full, gracious lips pressed warm and lingering to his. All the love, the passion of the wilful heart, his exclusively, her very being absorbed in his. How must Guy Treherne have loathed the hated presence! How must he have recoiled from the touch of the baby hand, have shuddered at the sound of the baby voice! How unnatural to him must have seemed the caresses that were those of the

woman only, not the mother! How hideous a burden must the secret have become day by day and year by year! Yet he had kept it, and borne all, and in silence; a martyr to the love that had been so little realized and never appreciated. Was it understood now at last, in all its madness and its sorrow?

Carlton Treherne folded up the letter and rose. As he did so his eyes fell upon the radiant face, smiling down upon him from the opposite wall. He turned very pale. The beauty of the painted face, its radiance and its smiles, hurt him, as did the memory of the love that, accepted in a lordly, imperious way as his due, had, like the rest of his life, been a lie. Had the letter chanced to fall into her hands—had she known all that he now knew—had the secret been hers instead of his—how would she have acted? Could even her love have stood such a test? Could she have clung to him in spite of all, or would she have mourned the poor, deformed baby that had been her

very own, and have cast him from her, as her husband was only too ready to do, with scorn and loathing? How can the living answer for the dead? The beautiful blue eyes still smiled down upon him, not a shadow of doubt or foreboding in their clear depths. He was glad to look away, and hastily left the room.

The dawn would soon be breaking; the whole household had been asleep for hours. With slow, heavy tread he passed along the hall, and up the great oak staircase, the black night-fog that had penetrated even there, making the lamp he held burn with a yellow, sickly light. Once or twice he staggered as might one who, having received a heavy blow, begins only after a time to feel its effects. Having in that one day lost all that had hitherto made life worth the having—fortune, position, name—there was one loss that, worldly and ambitious though he was, he at that moment felt more than all the rest.

“When I am gone, who will care for her

or her picture? She will take her place among the rest, at his side, as his wife. I stood between them in life, I parted them in death. They belonged to each other—I belonged to neither.”

As he passed the old clock on the stairs, it struck the hour. He started, and lifted up to it the pale face but dimly lighted by the shaded lamp. Often enough had he heard it before, day by day, and hour by hour, unmoved; but now it thrilled through every nerve of the mighty, tired frame. The voice familiar to him from his cradle, the one voice in the old place that had not in the course of years died away. It had been associated with almost every memory of his childhood, from the day when he had been held up in the strong, loving arms to receive its Christmas greeting. It was not of that it reminded him now, however, but of the day when they had stood together—mother and son—and looked upon Guy Treherne's dead face. The old clock on the stairs struck the same hour it was striking

now, and, crying bitterly, Katherine Treherne had wailed out—

“Oh, if we had but arrived a few hours sooner!”

Remorse had come at last. She had refused to return at his call; she had denied him his last earthly wish—a sight of her face before he died. She had not believed in his danger, and Carlton had the measles—she had taken him from school to Brighton to be nursed—and she could not leave him, even for his father. When she first looked on the dead face she had cried and moaned and wrung her hands despairingly; yet, even then, she did not kiss the pale lips, or even touch the folded hands of whose symmetry the living had been so proud, or the bright, moist, auburn curls that stranger hands had smoothed out and prepared for the grave; but turning from the dead to the living, she had sobbed out her grief and remorse upon the boy's shoulder, and his kisses, so precious because so rarely given, had comforted her.

The lover and the loved now slept in the grave, and he who had been the blessing of the one life, the curse of the other, turned his eyes slowly from the face of the old clock, and went on his way.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWELVE o'clock had struck, and one o'clock too ; but Mr. Fenham, the most punctual of men, had not appeared to keep his appointment.

Squire Treherne was pacing the library in no very patient mood. He had that morning avoided the gallery where hung the successive generations of Trehernes, and his own room where smiled down upon him from the wall the face of Katherine Treherne. A man of action even more than of thought, he had gone about his daily work just as usual, his step not a whit less firm and free, his voice less steady, his look less keen and clear.

In his practical mind had even arisen a doubt as to the truth of what he had heard

and read. Such a story was more easily doubted than believed. Possessed of such a secret, could the proud master of Treherne have kept it through those long weary years? Would he not, must he not, at some time or other, have been tempted into a betrayal of it? Would he not in some unguarded moment have let it out, not to his wife perhaps, but, in his scorn and loathing, to the low-born changeling who stood in his way? Had such words been spoken, they would not have been forgotten; but the squire's manner to the boy, though cold, had never been unkind, and if altogether devoid of affection, so, too, had it been devoid of everything like antipathy. Could so weak a character have been capable of anything so great as would have been such a mastery, not only over his feelings, but over his very looks? It seemed impossible! Far more probable did it seem, far more in keeping with his general character, that he should in a moment of rage and despair, goaded to madness by the

woman's cruel neglect, have invented the wild story as a means of vengeance. It might even have been the simple raving of fever, the diseased frame working on the disordered mind; for not a suspicion of such a family mystery had transpired until the day before his death; and the following morning, terrified at what he had done, he had withdrawn his confidence; asked that the letter should be returned to him, and made the lawyer swear never to reveal to Mrs. Treherne what had been told to him.

Carlton Treherne, his mind clear, shrewd, and unprejudiced, well adapted to the solving of hard problems and the reducing of them to reason and common sense, had almost come to the conclusion that the thing could not be: it was too romantic, too improbable for the prosaic age in which he lived. "If secret there were, it had for years been in the possession of the lawyer, the doctor, the maid, and the lodge-keeper and his wife. Would they one and all have held their tongues and kept it so close that

not even a suspicion of its existence had got abroad? Judging of human nature from experience, he said the thing was impossible. It would before that have been made available as a means to extort money either from himself or the rightful heir. The low-born impostor would hardly have been left so long in undisturbed possession of such a fortune and position. Had Mr. Fenham himself put faith in the imposture, would he not have made use of his knowledge before this? A man so dishonest and unscrupulous would hardly have kept through long years a secret that it would be so to his interest to reveal. If he was wilfully deceiving him, his knavery should be exposed that very day. But why was the fellow not there to keep his appointment? At three o'clock there was to be a meeting of the electors, and he had promised to be present and to address them. Would the mystery be cleared up before he went? and if so, in what character would he appear among them?"

The mystery was not cleared up; the lawyer did not make his appearance; and, punctually at the hour appointed, Carlton Treherne stood among the electors and addressed them, none the less calmly and forcibly for the shadow of a great fear that, though not as yet admitted, lay heavy at his heart. Perhaps, indeed, the consciousness that he might be addressing his party for the last time as its representative, gave to his words a power and solemnity they could not otherwise have had. It was not as Carlton Treherne he spoke—all personal individuality was for the time suspended, all personal interests held in abeyance. It might never be granted to him as the *man*, as it would have been to him as Carlton Treherne, to speak for them. But he could speak to them as man to man, and he did.

When they gathered around him, congratulating him on his probable success—of which they were now more than sanguine, confident—he grasped, not without emotion,

each outstretched hand. When they spoke of the future—prophesying great things, both for him and them, and testifying by word and look how proud they were of their choice—he said nothing; but as they dispersed, each light word of parting had for him something of the solemnity of an eternal farewell. “Would they ever again meet—they and Carlton Treherne? or was their faith in him, like everything else connected with his past, to prove a delusion and a wrong?”

Not a few of those present were old friends of the Treherne family—men of influence in the county, who were gratified to see a Treherne turning his attention, for the first time, to public affairs; and embracing, contrary to all precedent, the same line of politics as themselves. It would be no slight satisfaction to them to be so well represented, and see as their member one of their own set, a man of birth as well as fortune.

One of his oldest friends and staunchest

supporters, Sir George Houghton, accompanied him to the park gates, glad of an extra half-hour to discuss their prospects.

“Little doubt now of our getting you in, eh, Treherne?” were his parting words. “By this time *they*”—a contemptuous stress laid on the word that stood for the rival party—“must see that they have not a leg to stand on.”

No doubt the friends and supporters of Colonel Beverley took a far less hopeless view of their situation than did their sanguine opponent Sir George. But the election fever had now reached its height. In a week or so the contest so fiercely carried on would be decided, one way or another; then brother would no longer rise against brother, and neighbours hitherto friendly would no longer glare at each other with such evil looks, but be friends as before. The member duly elected, the irrevocable would be accepted, as it always is; the fever would abate, order be restored, and all sober Englishmen, one moment led

astray by enthusiasm, would return to their normal condition, and not again venture out of it to the end of their days, or—until the next election.

Carlton Treherne was thinking, as he walked on alone, that an election was no bad test of a man's character and position. By those who choose the man and shout for him, you may judge of the man himself. He may gain the day, and have good cause to be heartily ashamed both of his success and his supporters. Carlton Treherne was proud of his. It had been a new phase in his life—hitherto so independent and self-reliant—to look to others for success; but that was but as the prelude to the future he had chosen. Public opinion his master. The public voice that which he would have to obey. After twenty years of a public life, would he hold his head as high and have such faith in himself and the purity of his motives as he had now?

He had no fear for the future. If only he could get rid of the one haunting dread!

But the suspense must soon be over now. Mr. Fenham must have arrived by that time; and for once he would have to be honest. Another hour might decide his fate, remove the intolerable burden of a hideous and guilty secret, or—— His brow contracted, and his hand clenched itself with a spasm of pain. The movement was an involuntary one. He could still reason calmly, and reason told him that the thing was monstrous. It was so much more easy to realize it as a nightmare to be awakened from, than a reality to be faced and grappled with.

Anxious to get home, he quickened his pace, little guessing that his late companion, having recollected something he had omitted to say, was trying to overtake him with all the speed of which his very limited capacity would allow. At last, hearing himself called, he turned, and waited until the baronet came up panting, and very red in the face.

“My dear fellow, at what a rate you

were going! If you adopt the same go-ahead pace in politics, there'll be little chance of your old friends keeping up with you."

"How could I tell an old friend was behind?"

"No, of course you couldn't; but I thought I would just turn back and congratulate you on the narrow escape you had yesterday—a wonderful escape!"

The squire looked his surprise.

"You must have been with him up to the last moment. Hardly gone when the accident occurred."

The squire had good cause to remember with whom he had been the day before.

"Mr. Fenham."

"Yes. What a dreadful thing!—thrown, and killed on the spot."

"Thrown from his gig?"

"Did you not know? As he turned from the inn where he had left you, the mare, a vicious brute, they say, gave a plunge, and he was flung out against the curb-stone and

taken up, dead. Such an escape you had! Why, you might have been killed too, and——”

“ You would have lost your member.”

Sir George gave an apologetic cough. That was just what he would have said had he given expression to his thoughts. The fever being at its height, the death of their candidate would most certainly, at that critical moment, have seemed to many a far greater calamity than the death of twenty ordinary mortals. Indeed, at the meeting that afternoon so engrossed had the electors been by the one absorbing interest, that the violent death of a fellow citizen, well known and respected as was Mr. Fenham, had for the time been forgotten.

The baronet, having panted out his congratulations, once more left Carlton Treherne to his thoughts, which were at first broken and confused. At first, too, he went on at the same rapid pace as before—then all at once he stopped short. There

was no need for him to hurry on to meet his fate. It did not await him in the person of Mr. Fenham. He had gone to attend a higher Summons than that of the man he had thought to ruin; whose fate, taken in so sudden and awful a manner out of his hands, now stood before Carlton Treherne in the shape of a great temptation. And stopping short in his hurried walk, he faced it. A Power higher than his own or that of the dead man, had stepped in between him and the social ruin he had not dared to face as he now did the hope of escape. What now lay between him and the future of which he had dreamt, but a miserable, blotted scrawl, that the writer had himself doomed to destruction? The tongue, false and slanderous, perhaps, for ever silenced in the grave, the letter a heap of powdered ashes—what could come between Carlton Treherne and the ambitious dream of a lifetime?

With an unconscious movement the

strong right hand slowly raised itself, opened wide, then as slowly closed together as if there lay already beneath it the paper that could betray him, the only living voice that could now rise up against him.

CHAPTER XIX.

AGATHA sat at her husband's feet. The day's work was over, and this was her holiday time, just a quiet half-hour before the lamp was lit. Twilight and firelight were so pleasant.

John Rawdon had been trying very hard to pick up his strength and get about again. To the few who came to make inquiries his invariable answer was, "that he was getting stronger day by day; that he was feeling quite himself again, and in a few days—yes, a few days at latest, he would be about, as usual." And this he said with such a feverish glitter in his eyes, such a feverish flush on the sunken cheek; such a feverish eagerness in his voice.

Agatha said nothing, to strangers at least. She knew that he was anxious to be back in the school for her sake, and that of their unborn baby, much as he might dread it for his own; and so she cheered and encouraged him, and made so much of every favourable sign, that she at times even cheated him, though never herself, into something like hope. But he was not growing stronger, and she knew it. He might boast to the neighbours of his improvement; but the straining eyes and feverish lips, and the trembling of the hand with which he still had to support himself, belied his words.

Agatha knew that he would never get stronger so long as he fretted. And ever since the day when he had sat at the window expecting the squire's visit, he had fallen into a strange state of nervous despondency, continually haunted by a dread of he knew not what—a nameless, shapeless fear that pursued him everywhere. The weather, too, was against him; grey, heavy fogs lying over the earth; low, sullen

winds howling round the exposed and unsubstantial cottage. Pale and shivering, he would start at every sound, shudder at the return of every day, and sit through the long, weary hours, an open book before him, but his eyes bent aside, watching, waiting, listening.

The doctor said it was all weakness, the result of the fever; when he got stronger, he would recover his spirits. But he did not get stronger; and Agatha knew that he never would so long as the blue eyes, now so unnaturally large, continued to turn so often, and with such feverish longing, to the door. "If only Mr. Treherne would come! Had he forgotten them? Was he holding back on purpose? Had her husband been slandered to him? Would he not help them, after all? She told John that it would be all right. Of course it would. Mr. Treherne's looks had been so kind, and his words too. What had they to fear? Before him she was always bright and hopeful, laughing at his sickly fears, and smiling when he sighed.

People said that she looked wretchedly ill ; and sometimes of an evening, when he dozed and she sat at his feet, as she was doing now, her handkerchief would go up to her face and be pressed there convulsively for half an hour together ; but that might only have been to keep the firelight from her eyes, which looked strangely weak and red of late.

The schoolmaster had been dozing rather longer than usual, and Agatha sat quite still, her head against his knee, when suddenly he started.

“ Didn’t you hear something—a step outside ? ”

She listened.

The low, sullen wind was howling down the chimney, and under the door, and across the window to the corner, round which it died.

“ It is only the wind, dear. Do you feel a draught ? ”

Of course he felt a draught. It reached him from every part of the room, window

and door and chimney. But he never complained; he only shivered, and she nestled closer.

A pause; then he started again, agitated and trembling.

“Agatha, some one is outside. Don’t you hear?”

Yes, she heard now. The bell rang, and she got up slowly and painfully, and went to the door.

“Agatha—if it should be he—you know—I don’t think I could see him. You will tell him——”

He was trembling all over, and every feature quivered with nervous suspense.

From where she stood, her hand upon the door, she turned back on him the indulgent wife’s eyes that had in them so much of love and sorrow, but nothing of contempt. Her only answer was a smile; but she went back to the hearth and stirred the fire into a bright blaze. Alive as he was to all outward impressions, light and warmth would, she knew, help to give him courage.

As she drew back the bolt of the street-door her heart beat very fast. She felt so sure that it was the squire. Who but he gave the bell that sharp, imperious ring, that might do well enough at Treherne, where sound was lost in space, but that echoed so painfully through the tiny house?

The passage was dark, and so was the garden outside, but she recognized the outlines of the tall figure, and eagerly held out her hand. He might have seen it, but did not, and passed in without a word of greeting.

“Is your husband at home?”

She could not see his face, but his voice was anything but encouraging—harsh and cold, and her heart sank.

She told him falteringly how ill John still was, and weak and nervous. She would have added something else, but he stopped her.

“I have to speak with him. He is down, I suppose?” and he laid his hand on the door.

The stern abruptness of his tone and

manner quite frightened the poor little wife ; but she would not let him in to John without a word of warning and entreaty.

“I hope there is no bad news. You won't say anything to distress him, will you? He is already so anxious and depressed. An unkind word would kill him ; I'm sure it would.”

He muttered something that was more than half lost in the brown depths of his beard. All that she distinctly caught were the concluding words, “I must speak with him alone.” Then he set her aside, not roughly—it only seemed so to her, accustomed as she was to the soft, caressing touch of John's frail fingers—and going in, closed the door against her.

Anxious and indignant, Agatha stole away to the kitchen, where old Stephen Rawdon sat before the fire, smoking his pipe.

Ever since the day when John had first been stricken down with the fever, old Stephen had not stirred from home ; and

in her darkest hour, when so lonely and frightened and despairing, Agatha had found the greatest comfort in his constant presence and sympathy. For many days sympathy had alone been accepted of him ; for, jealous of the dear privilege of nursing, she had allowed no one else to enter the room, least of all the poor imbecile old man who was so little to be relied upon. But one night, when quite worn out, having fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, and slept longer than she would have thought possible, she awoke to find grandfather seated beside the bed ; and John, his head resting against his arm, his hand tightly locked in his, fast asleep. She could not help a pang of jealousy ; but she knew that old Stephen had nursed her darling long before the beautiful blue eyes had shone into her life. After that, he shared in all her watchings by night and by day ; and though they had always been good friends, it was no wonder that they were now faster friends than ever.

“Well, grandfather, is the pipe smoked out yet? I’ve come to make the tea. John’s always ready for his tea.”

“Ay, ay, he was always one for tea, was John.”

The ex-gamekeeper was not by any means a conversational old gentleman, or brilliant company, but Agatha chatted on, knowing that he liked it.

“We are to have little Willie’s rabbit for supper to-night. It will be quite a treat; it has made such a famous pie. Poor little fellow! how sorry he must have been to kill it—his own tame rabbit, you know, the one he was always talking about. His mother happened to say it would make a capital pie for the master’s supper, and he had it killed, and brought it.”

Agatha was making the master’s toast, one arm resting on old Stephen’s knee, and her eyes quite full at thought of little Willie’s generosity, when the squire’s voice, so much too powerful and sonorous for the narrow space which the falling of a cinder

or the schoolmaster's low, musical tones seemed to fill, rang through the house. He was calling her.

When she entered the parlour he stood on the hearthrug, a look half alarmed, half puzzled, on his face ; and lying back in the armchair, which he had clutched with both hands as if to save himself from falling, his lips bloodless and parted, his eyes closed, was John Rawdon.

To reach his side, lay her hand on his shoulder as if in protection, and face round upon Mr. Treherne, was the work of a moment. "He had been cruel, unjust. He had frightened John, perhaps turned him out of his situation, and she had not been near to soften the blow." She did not say much—she could not be loud even in her anger ; but her looks spoke volumes.

Upon the squire they made but little impression. His face wore its hardest look. But her voice had roused the schoolmaster. He opened his eyes, loosened his convulsive hold, smiled faintly, and tried to speak.

The squire frowned and shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He could feel nothing but contempt for the man's weakness. He even doubted whether the shock of surprise had not proved too great, and whether he had fully understood what had been told him. He therefore turned from him to Agatha, and repeated in a hard, dry tone, what had brought him there that evening.

It was all strange and wonderful, and quite like a dream or a fairy-tale; so Agatha thought as she listened. The man before her, so grand and stately, a being so infinitely superior to anything to which she had dared raise her eyes, that he had from the first struck her childish imagination with a kind of awe, was not, after all, the squire, the master of Treherne, but the son of one of the lodge-keepers of the Park, and the grandson of poor old Stephen Rawdon, who now sat, happily unconscious of the honour of such a connection, by the kitchen fire. And her husband, John Rawdon, the lame

village schoolmaster, despised, hated, friendless, and almost broken-hearted, was the rightful owner of all that noble property, which had been his from his birth.

The speaker was too plain and direct in all he said for there to be any doubt as to the truth of his story, wild and improbable as it seemed. She did not quite see how it had all come about, but she believed his simple statement. When he had done speaking she laid her hand on John's arm, stroking it unconsciously with fond, fluttering fingers, as she asked in a breathless undertone—

“It is really true? There is no mistake? You are quite sure Treherne is John's home? He is not the village schoolmaster, but the master of Treherne?”

“Treherne belongs to your husband. I should hardly have spoken until every doubt had been cleared up.”

“And I thought you had come to turn him out of his situation, after all! He thought so too. But that's over now. He

can never again be at the mercy of any one. He will not die now—and leave me alone!”

She stopped short here, for back upon her had come with a rush the memory of all that they, that he, had suffered—the cruelty, the injustice, the coarse, brutal insults. She remembered his tears, his shame, his agony; the wild, miserable words that had escaped him in the fever. Could all this be indeed over, and for ever! She was not thinking of herself; it was in utter forgetfulness of herself, and even of the presence of a stranger, that she, usually so quiet and reserved, fell at her husband's feet, and straining her arms about him, broke out with a suppressed passion and vehemence that only such a moment could have called forth. And in the few broken sentences was told the history of all that she had suffered—in silence.

“Oh, my darling!” she said, thinking only of him and of all that he had gone through, “you need not die now because

they made it so hard for you to live. You need not die and leave me alone. I shall not see you getting weaker and weaker because you had not the courage to get strong and go back to the work you hated. It was for my sake you wished to live." And closer still the straining arms tightened their clasp.

"Hush, wife!"

But she would not be silenced. When his wrongs had made of his sorrow something too sacred even for words, she had held her tongue; but now, almost beside herself with the rapture of a new hope, for him, the words would come, she could not hold them back, they burst forth in a rush of love and ecstasy; and when at last they failed her, she still knelt on, the rapt, adoring eyes upraised to his, and around him the frail, passionate clasp that had already held him back from death and despair.

And so their visitor left them, passing quietly out, unnoticed, and without even a word of farewell. They had quite forgotten

his presence. In that first shock of joy they had no thought but for each other, and they let the man to whom they had for years looked up as their patron and benefactor pass away without a word of sympathy or interest in his fate. Theirs had been taken out of his hands; they had nothing more to expect from him. They had changed places; but they were apart still, and between them and him there was the Great Gulf Fixed.

So he left them now, in their hour of prosperity, as he had so often left them in their darker hours—together—and went away feeling more lonely than he had ever done in his life before. How alone he was, how utterly alone now that trouble had come upon him, that he had yet to learn.

CHAPTER XX.

Would the lazy old town of Woolmaston ever recover the shock it had sustained? Would it ever drop quietly back into the old groove after the terrible upset it had had? Some towns, like some characters, have in them a strong sensational element, and are kept in a constant flutter of excitement by such tragical events as murder, bigamy, forgery, a strike, or a suicide. But Woolmaston was not, and never had been, a sensational town. It had gone mad about the election, certainly; but, then, that, as an epidemic, is not to be classed among ordinary sensations, and cannot be compared to the sudden electric shocks that had shaken it to its very foundation. Hardly had it recovered the violent death of its first and

most popular lawyer, picked up dead at the corner of the principal street, and carried along to the handsome stone house that so many had envied him, along the echoing pavement in full view of all the parlour windows, so that only an ill-fate, or the fog, prevented his neighbours having the pleasure of a last look,—than they were startled, almost paralyzed, by a fresh shock, compared with which the former had been as nothing. Down it came upon them, a sudden crash—a sort of moral earthquake, that made the ground on which they stood totter and collapse, and filled the public mind with a vague sense of insecurity. It had upon them the benumbing effect of a great social convulsion. The hue-and-cry of the present age is for great social convulsions. But it is with that, as with many another thing for which they cry—give it them, and they don't know what to make of it. Woolmaston did not know what to make of the sudden and complete overthrow of a great recognized power. It felt much as an astrologer might,

who, reading the heavens as usual for signs, were to miss the very star that formed the centre of his calculations. What was the world coming to—the state of society, and all its received traditions, when a man like the master of Treherne could fall so low! Every tongue was set wagging, and every head too. They talked, they stared, they wondered. The beggarly schoolmaster, sickly, lame, despised, the lord of Treherne, invested with all his predecessor's lost dignity, raised to the position from which he had fallen; living in the fine old place that it had been his pride to improve and enlarge, and of which he had seemed as much a part as the old grey walls, the oaks, the stiff family portraits; waited upon by the very men and women who had served *him*. And he himself—nowhere! And all this by one crushing blow that could neither be foreseen nor prevented.

They knew nothing of the fierce struggle that had gone on in the man's mind, the temptation to hush the matter up, to treat

it as a wicked invention or a mad delusion; to destroy the letter, and with it the only tangible proof of his ruin. But such a state of mind could not last long, it was against reason and common sense; and the man's straightforward energy of character came to the rescue. If it was all a delusion or a lie, there could be no difficulty in proving it such. If it was the truth, he knew what he had to do; and he did it. And there the struggle and the temptation ended.

All his inquiries had at first led to nothing, and he might have been again tempted to let the matter rest but for a certain dogged tenacity of purpose which would not be satisfied with half measures. His own supposed parents had died long since—indeed, none of the family were now left but the imbecile old dotard, Stephen; and the ex-maid, if, indeed, she still lived, not having been heard of for years. The doctor who had seen the heir of the Trehernes born, he contrived to hunt up. It was not the usual Didford practitioner who

attended the family, but his son-in-law, then staying with him, and who had obeyed a hasty, urgent summons, his father-in-law being out of the way, and the London doctor not yet arrived. He had seen the child born—a puny little creature, slightly deformed in the hip he had believed at the time, and more dead than alive. He had told the father it could not live. He had left Didford next morning, but had been surprised to hear afterwards that it had grown into such a fine healthy boy, the image of his mother, who was a very handsome woman. Who had attended Mrs. Rickart, the lodge-keeper's wife, he could not discover—probably their own family doctor, who was dead. The London physician to whom he went professed to remember everything, but evidently remembered nothing. He said "Yes, yes, to be sure," to everything advanced by his visitor; but he was old, had retired years before, and had no wish to be carried back nearly half as many years as he had lived.

At this juncture many another would have given up the search; but it had acquired for him a horrible fascination, and he persevered. Every doubt must be set at rest before he felt himself once more a free man. The person most likely to do this was, of course, Mary Rawdon, now Mrs. Davidson, who had seen him born, and had married from Treherne about three months after his birth. But for years her relations had not heard of her. She had, twelve months after her marriage, gone to America, with her husband; and as by degrees all her more respectable relations had died off, leaving only poor, disreputable old Stephen and his grandson, she had dropped all connection with the mother country. Many believed her dead. If she were alive and could be found, the mystery would be at once cleared up. If, on the other hand, her death could be ascertained, there was little doubt but that the master of Treherne, having done what he could and finding no proof whatever of the truth of

the absurd, improbable story, would consider the matter settled, and let it rest. The only person in whom he placed sufficient confidence to show him the letter, a Mr. James Treherne, brother of the late Mrs. Treherne, a retired barrister of some note, pooh-pooed it as a malicious forgery, or, as the squire believed, a mad freak of the late squire, Guy Treherne. He had seen him, a few days before his death, a prey to disease and morbid fancies, and he pronounced him quite capable, in the delirium of fever and jealousy, of any act of vengeance, however wild; but knowing him as he did, he believed him quite incapable of the heroic self-devotion that could alone have kept him silent through so many years.

“My dear Carlton,” had been James Treherne’s parting advice, “burn the letter, and think no more about it—for the present, at least. If you devote to it your time and thoughts, what is to become of the election! First secure your seat, then return to the detective business if you

please. If all the inquiries we have set on foot lead to nothing, it is simply that there is nothing for them to lead to. Bah! your father was mad, or the lawyer a rogue. Anyhow, they are both dead now," he added, in a tone of hearty satisfaction.

Carlton Treherne (he was Carlton Treherne still at that time), following his uncle's good advice, turned his thoughts from the detective to the electioneering business. The fever that raged among his constituents, once more quickened his own pulses. He longed to be among them now that that horrid incubus was little more than the shapeless phantom of a dream.

He would return to Treherne at once.

He slept that night better than he had done for some time, and awoke in high spirits, feeling that an almost unbearable load had been lifted from his heart and life. Impatient to be off, he stood at the window watching for the cab that was to take him to the station, when a slip of paper was brought up to him. There was a person

below who wished to speak with him. The paper told him who the person was—"Mrs. Davidson."

Erect, calm, apparently unmoved, and perfectly self-possessed, he gave the order for her to be shown up, while all the time he felt his brain reel and the very ground give way under his feet. He knew that he stood on the brink of a precipice, the fall from which would be something worse than death.

Mrs. Davidson made her appearance—a brisk little woman with keen, bright black eyes, which she fixed at once upon the face of the man before her, as if to make sure of the sort of person she had to deal with. The scrutiny was evidently satisfactory; the perfect calm of the rough-hewn, mighty features encouraged her to speak.

She said that her reason for dropping all intercourse with English friends was that she feared getting into trouble for that Treherne affair. She had acted at the time entirely upon impulse, with reckless

disregard to consequences, and out of pure love for her mistress—and it was the same with her master, the late squire, she was sure. She had not thought of any harm, she never meant any; but afterwards, when she married, and her husband had such a good position in America, she saw things in a different light; she was afraid mischief would come of the rash act, and had no wish to be mixed up in it. Now, however, that her husband was dead and she had only herself to think of, she had come forward, hearing that inquiries were being instituted. She would be glad enough to have the matter cleared up and set to rights, as things had turned out so differently from what she or any one else could expect.

“Would she state the facts as far as they had come under her own personal knowledge?”

“Oh, certainly. She remembered it all as if it were but yesterday; she was not likely ever to forget it. Mrs. Treherne had had a sharp time of it; but throughout, her

thought was for the child far more than for herself—she was in an agony of hope and fear; and when it was born, such a miserable little creature, deformed, shrivelled, more dead than alive, they dared not show it to her. But she raved on like mad, and wouldn't listen to her husband or even look at him, beating him back from her with her hot, restless hands, crying out that her baby was hideous, deformed, dead, and he dare not show it her! that he had brought a curse upon it and her, that her child was not like other children; and so she went on, till her strength failed her. The doctor had said the child could not live, and he was scarcely gone when it had a sort of fit, stiffened, turned of a livid paleness, and cold as death to the touch. It was no wonder we believed it dead. And there was the poor mistress in the next room moaning low to herself in the sort of stupor into which she had fallen, and still stretching out her arms blindly for the child that was never to lie in them. And the master—

well, I hope never again to see a man in the state he was in then. And he was a good, noble-hearted gentleman as ever lived," added the brisk little woman, with a sudden flash of the bright black eyes. "And I think, at that moment, I would have given my life to get him and her, too, out of the trouble; and that must have put into my head about my niece Jane Rickharts' boy, who was some hours older, and such a fine little fellow—all the Rawdons have been fine men, every one of them, from their cradle. But the poor mother had had a dreadful bad time of it; she had no milk for the child, who was not allowed to go near her, and the thought came to me that if it could be brought to the mistress for awhile, it might be the saving of her. She seemed hardly in her right senses, poor lady; but if she could be quieted and got off to sleep, when the doctor and the nurse from London arrived, they might know what to do. Mr. Treherne seized the idea as he would have caught at anything that pro-

mised a hope. I fetched the child from the lodge. James Rickharts, a hard, selfish sort of man, was only too glad to get rid of it and its tiresome wailing ; so I took it away with me, and brought it to my mistress. I shall never forget what a light broke over her whole face as I put it into her arms ; they opened wide to receive it, and she laughed quite wildly, I thought, and held it close to her bosom, and after that she wanted the master, and when he came she called him husband, twice over, which I never heard her do before, and drew him to her with her disengaged arm and put it round his neck, and kissed him on the forehead and then on the lips ; and this quite overcame him, I think, for when he followed me into the next room he just knelt down by the cradle, where lay his own little baby, and laid his face upon its face and cried like a child.

“ My mistress got a good long sleep. When she awoke, only her husband was with her. I don't know what passed between them, but when he came out to me he

seemed very much excited. He said that she was calling for the child, Jane's child, not her own, and it must be taken in to her. 'He had hoped that she might have forgotten it in her sleep, and he could have told her the truth; but she was so happy and so proud that it would kill her to be undeceived. He would tell her when the right moment came; till then she must believe the baby her own.'

"He thought only of her. I was thinking of the London doctor and nurse who were to arrive in less than an hour (it was the child's premature birth that had caused all the confusion), and their own medical attendant, Mr. Nicolls, who might be expected any moment. 'We can't hide it from them, sir,' I said, looking towards the cradle. He, too, looked towards it. 'She cursed me for its deformity,' he said bitterly, remembering her wild words, for which she wasn't responsible, I am sure, poor lady, or she would never have said them. 'Better have it dead, Rawdon, than living,' he said, 'if she

couldn't love it.' He was still thinking only of her, you see. 'But the doctor, sir,' I persisted, 'and the nurse.' I never meant to be a party to any criminal deceit. I believed that in a day or two all would be explained, and I felt so sorry for the master that I couldn't help doing what he asked of me. Before the doctor arrived I had taken the dead baby to the lodge.

"Jane had not missed her child—she was too bad for that; an old woman was with her, but she was half blind, and dull; and John Rickharts, as sharp and close a man as ever I knew, was not one to let anybody interfere with his plans. He could hold his own against every old woman in the village or young either: this I knew, and that I could trust him as I did myself. I think that from the first he saw further than ever we did, master and I: to him it was only a good speculation which he was resolved to keep in his own hands.

"Of course, when the doctor and the nurse arrived, they made such a fuss about

the child, Jane's child, as never was. To hear them you would have thought there never was such a baby born. And then the likeness they and all the visitors found to the master and mistress, and aunts and uncles, and even to the family portraits! And I must say that the mistress was just as foolish as any of the rest. Talk of a mother's instinct! No mother that ever I saw took to her own child as she did to that one. It just became her life from the moment I put it into her arms. She could hardly bear to have it out of them, much less out of her sight; and when she fell asleep, it was with her face turned to the cradle, that her eyes might fall on it the first thing on awaking. She told me so herself; for she grew much kinder and more friendly to every one at that time, especially to Mr. Treherne, of whom she took more notice than ever she had before, for it had been easy enough to see that the love was all on his side. But she made more of him those three months than at any time since their

marriage; and often when I saw her so proud and happy, I thought what a pity it was that so much trouble and shame lay behind. This, however, she was never to know—the master would not hear of it. He dare not tell her the truth. He said so himself; for proud and reserved though he was, and the real gentleman every inch of him, like all the Trehernes, he was obliged to confide in me, knowing what I did; and I believe that the shame of the lie he was acting, and which nothing but his love for her and her reproaches and the fear of losing her would have led him into, was taking all the spirit out of him. Anyhow, he never seemed the same to me afterwards. He said that if she were to hear the truth, if she were told of the deceit practised upon her, and that the child she had nursed and made so much of was not her own, she would never forgive him, but would just leave the house and him for ever. Perhaps if she were to have a child of her own she would bear the blow better, or she might

tire of her love, which I thought likely enough, for she was as full of whims and caprices as is the day of years, and had never cared for a new dress or a new jewel either, after the first time of wearing it. Three months after all this happened, I married. The master was very kind and generous, and very glad, I dare say, to have me go so far. He gave me a handsome sum of money and a beautiful silver tea-service, which I have still, and a wedding breakfast, after which he came in himself and made a speech ; he was always rather fond of speechifying, and he did do it beautifully, to be sure ! My niece Jane and her husband left the place as soon as she could get about. They had a farm given to them on another estate in a distant county, and every one wondered at their good luck. But they didn't enjoy it long, for James was killed in a railway accident, and poor Jane—she was always a weak, helpless sort of creature, and as fond of and proud of her husband as if he'd been the

best of men, which I'm very sure he wasn't, and any other woman with a bit more spirit would have been bullied into her grave long before—died soon after, of the shock.”

Here the narrative, that had been interrupted by many a pause, but not, to the woman's surprise, by one question or remark from her companion, whose face still wore the fixed, impassive look that said nothing, came to a standstill.

“That's all that came under my personal knowledge, sir.”

“Thank you.”

He turned from her back to the window through which he had been looking when she entered. Down below still stood the cab that was to have taken him to the station. The horse slept; the man read—a Radical paper, no doubt, in which he seemed mightily interested. Something in the man or his occupation recalled to the reputed master of Treherne, who must henceforth be known as plain Mr. Rickharts, the constituents who were awaiting him. It might

have recalled something else too; the fact that no family tragedy, however sacred, with which the law has to deal can be kept private. It at once becomes public property and a source of infinite excitement and gratification to every newspaper reader in the United Kingdom. As the Liberal member, the friend and voice of the people, he had dreamt more than once of seeing his name in print. But how vague, after all, is the line that divides fame from notoriety! As Carlton Treherne the member and eloquent speaker, he might in the course of time gain a hearing and public notice; but as Carlton Rickharts the fallen hero, how much more universal would be the attention and interest he would excite! For how many days would little else but himself and his fall be spoken about; and then— Well, is it not the fate of the great even as of the notorious to be forgotten? Sooner or later—what matters it?—it is the common lot of all.

Mrs. Davidson gave a brisk little cough,

that plainly meant that there was something else she had to say, and she wished to say it. He had for the moment forgotten her presence, and turned sharply round, a faint flush upon his face, but its expression unchanged.

“It was not until long afterwards, when I had been married many years, that James wrote and told me that the child I had so surely believed dead still lived. It must have been in a sort of fit, from which it had recovered soon after I left it with him; but through the night it had seemed so near death, that he had not the heart to let us know. (My belief is that the man’s heart had nothing to do with it, but just his greed for gain. He thought it would serve him better to keep his child at the Hall, and let the other pass for dead.) The next day he took it into the town of N——, where he was not known, and where, it being such a big, crowded place, there could be little fear of detection, and there gave it out to nurse. Contrary to all expectation,

it lived on from week to week, but so small and pining, and its life so uncertain, that he didn't think it worth the trouble it would get us all into if he made its existence known. That's what he said. When he left the lodge for the distant farm I spoke of, sir, he gave the child, without betraying the secret of its birth, to his only sister, who had married John Rawdon, old Stephen's son, and had lately returned from Australia. For a good sum of money paid down, they consented to adopt it for their own; and afterwards, when John Rawdon got the situation of gamekeeper at the Park, it went with them to Treherne to live, and has ever since been known there as John Rawdon, the gamekeeper's son. What induced Jane's husband to act as he did, what induced him to send the poor child to the very place that was his by rights, and then, after hiding his wicked deceit for years, confess it to me at last, can never now be known, for the next news I had from England was of his death.

My belief is, that he thought the right moment had come for making the truth known, or else he did it to extort money from me, hoping that I should buy his silence, rather than be implicated in such an ugly business. But now that I am a lone woman, with no one but myself to think about, I shall be glad to give all the help I can towards clearing up the mystery. I have James' letter at home, sir, if you should wish to see it?"

The question received no answer, simply because it had not been heard. The last words caught by him to whom she addressed herself were these—

“John Rawdon, the gamekeeper's son.”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE election was over. It had ended, as end it must under the circumstances, but rather differently to what the Liberals had so confidently expected. Their candidate having withdrawn, the other side had gained the day, and looked and talked very big, and would not for a moment have allowed that chance had anything to do with their success. Their new member, however, was more honest than his constituents, and it was with an odd look he greeted his late rival some few days afterwards.

“Well, Tre—— Rickharts”——a confused blush passing over the fine, manly face——
“I’m in for it, after all, you see. At my age, too—to begin life afresh! You let

me off cheaply this time ; but your turn will come. I hadn't a chance against you, you know—we all felt that ; but your turn will come. We shall have you in the House yet. I wouldn't mind staking upon it the newly acquired seat, that has cost me enough to make it of some value," with a sour look, and then his pleasant smile, and a shrug of the shoulders to make up for it.

It might have been more delicate in Colonel Beverley, the successful member, not to allude to the subject that was in every man's mind, and on every lip, too, except when the fallen hero was by ; but he was a blunt, plain-spoken soldier, who said what he felt, and felt what he said ; and Mr. Rickharts, low as he had fallen in the estimation of the world, had not fallen so low in his own as to resent a true friend's hearty words of sympathy.

"Never stake anything upon another man's chances, colonel—it's a losing concern," was his cool answer. Whatever else

he might have lost, even fate could not rob him of his manhood, or the self-respect that would stand him in good stead in his present position.

“The fellow doesn’t feel it,” had been the contemptuous exclamation of more than one of the late titled relations who had made such a fuss about him, and been so proud to own him.

“He was always more of the man of business than the gentleman,”—this from the Cabinet Minister who had been so largely indebted to him, and so ready to own the obligation, not many days before. “The way in which he managed that business for me was more worthy of a Rickharts than a Treherne. I declare,” with a sort of languid animation, “it wouldn’t be a bad thing to get him on to the estate. I think I’ll write and offer him a situation of some sort there; he could live at the house.”

Acting upon this generous idea—and to what generous ideas will not self-interest lead us?—he wrote and made the offer,

which was simply declined, in much the same form of words Carlton Rickharts would have used if fortune had never made a fool of him, but had left him in the class to which he now belonged.

Any other man, with a less iron nerve, and less indomitable will, would have been glad enough to leave the place where he had held so high a position, and hide himself and his insignificance in some out-of-the-way corner; but he had always, upon principle, stood up for the rights of man viewed as an independent being, without regard to either name or position; and he did not now see, his principles remaining the same, although his position was altered, why a Rickharts should go into hiding any more than a Treherne. He therefore not only remained in the place, but at Treherne House itself; for its new master, yielding to the advice of the eminent physician he had consulted, as also to the tender solicitations of the numerous friends and relations who had sprung up like

mushrooms about him in the course of a few hours, had gone abroad for the winter.

Early one bright autumn morning, Mr. Treherne and Agatha started on their travels, knowing about as little of foreign life and manners as they did of the great world into which they had so suddenly been launched. Mrs. Treherne was to take the lead, she having once upon a time spent four months at a French school; whereas, the late schoolmaster had never got farther than London. It had been earnestly impressed upon them that a courier and lady's-maid were accompaniments as necessary to the journey as a carpet-bag and rug; but the very idea had frightened the poor little woman into open rebellion. "She would not know what to do with a maid," she said; "she had been so accustomed to wait upon herself. And as to John," leaning towards him, and answering for him unhesitatingly, "he wanted no valet or courier or any one but her; she would look after him, and take care of him—she always did."

As mistress of Treherne, the late school-master's wife might certainly have shown more appreciation of her new and exalted position ; but, then, it was all so new to her. She had for so many years been accustomed to live for her husband, and in him, and care for no opinion but his ; and habit becomes, as we know, second nature.

She got her own way, as those meek little women generally do ; and the necessary accompaniments of lady's-maid and courier were dispensed with.

“To be together, and in strange countries—you and I, dear, quite alone ! Oh, John ! doesn't it all seem like a dream ? ”

This she said as they sat together for the last time for many months in the great Treherne drawing-room, two insignificant figures drawn close together, and not filling up the lofty space, two of them though there were, half so well as the gamekeeper's son, with his mighty presence.

“A courier and lady's-maid indeed ! Such nonsense ! As if we can't take care of each

other ; and as if they wouldn't be dreadfully in our way ! Everything is packed now, with the help of Mrs. Millet " (the old house-keeper who had wept tears of joy over the recovered heir—as she had done over her late master upon every possible occasion—declaring that he was the blessed image of his noble father, etc., etc.). " I don't think I have forgotten anything you could possibly want. There is our passport, and Bradshaw, and Murray. Oh, John ! isn't it all like a dream ? Even now I sometimes doubt whether it can be really, really true. That we should be travelling together, visiting all the places of which you have read in books, and of which you have so often spoken to me ! And I, who was so jealous and angry because all your learning and talents were thrown away ! What would you do without them now ? How proud every one will be of you ! " And much more to the same effect.

That same morning John Treherne had had a final interview with Mr. Rickharts, which amused the latter not a little.

As he himself knew nothing about business, or the management of an estate, the new squire could not stir a step without him; and he now begged him, as humbly as if their relative positions were in no way reversed, but he was still the one to be obliged, to stay on at Treherne and act for him until his return.

“ I don't know when I shall learn to look upon the place as my own, or upon you as other than its master; it seems so much more natural.” And he looked up admiringly at the stalwart form, and rugged, massive face, that had from childhood been to him an ideal of every manly perfection.

“ The rents will be coming in next month, and I think—— ”

“ Oh, you will arrange all that for me, won't you? You will look upon yourself as absolute master. I will write to you whenever we want money; but living abroad is not expensive, and we are only two, Agatha and myself.”

Mr. Rickharts could not repress a smile;

but he said nothing. "He'll learn how to spend his money like a Treherne, soon enough," was his mental reflection. "The world to which he now belongs will teach him both its value and worthlessness. I may leave him to its teaching." He consented, however, to remain at Treherne for the present simply, and in as few words as he had used to decline Lord L——'s offer. It was to him a mere business arrangement. He had to work for his living, and until the present squire could be made to realize more fully his position, he did not wish the old place, of which he had been so proud, to fall into hands less scrupulous than his own.

Mr. Treherne professed himself deeply grateful; but he had one last favour to ask, and that he deemed it a very great one was proved by the hesitation with which he asked it.

"It seems hard, after all you have done for me, and given up to me, to ask you for the only thing I had to restore you out of

my life in exchange for all you gave me—poor grandfather, you know—but the love of the old man could never be to you what it has been to me. If I could keep him by me, and watch over him, and care for him, as he did for me, when I had no one else ? ”

Again Mr. Rickharts smiled. To hear that wretched, worthless life spoken of as something almost sacred, to have not only the relationship but the companionship of the miserable old man humbly craved for as a priceless boon, bordered too closely upon the extravagant not to raise a smile.

“ Nothing that I could do for him in the future could make up for the past. He gave me the best of all he had—his love, and strength, and care ; for he wasn't then what he is now. He was good and noble and strong ; just such a man as you yourself will be,” with another admiring look, “ twenty years hence.”

Carlton Rickharts stroked his beard and lifted his brows slightly. Twenty years hence, instead of being Prime Minister, as

his friends had once so confidently predicted, he would be a second Stephen Rawdon. Well, why not? They were of the same flesh and blood, and chance had been the making of the one man, whilst drink had been the unmaking of the other.

“Poor grandfather!” John Treherne went on simply. “How good he was to me! You will let me have him when I come back, won’t you? I couldn’t part with him, or he with me. He clings to me now as I once did to him, and I don’t think he could be happy or at home with any one else. He thought that the change in my life would part us. As if it could!—as if anything could! It is now that I am learning the value of life”—a faint flush overspreading the pale, proud features—“that I feel how much I owe him. Until Agatha came to me I had never known any love but his.”

Carlton Rickharts looked up sharply. Was this meant as a reproach? Of all the love and care that would have surrounded his childhood, he, the low-born changeling,

had robbed him; and that part, at least, of his lawful inheritance could never be restored. But he could detect nothing like reproach in the look that met his; only a smile which lay deep down in the blue eyes and about the delicate, sensitive lips.

“And I never wanted any other,” he added hastily, as if guessing the other’s thoughts, which, perhaps, he did. “I would not have exchanged it for any other, even that of my own mother. He was to me all that she was to you, that she could never have been to me. Love is a stronger tie than that of blood. If she were here now, would you give her up, or she you?”

Carlton Rickharts looked away from the face of the son to that of the mother, which still smiled down upon him from the wall, where her own hands had hung the picture so many years before. Love a stronger tie than that of blood! Would she, for her great love’s sake, have owned him still in spite of all? How great that love had been he remembered well; he remembered, too,

Mary Rawdon's story. He looked into the deep eyes, at the full, gracious lips whose kisses had been so soft and so passionate; and realized for the first time that she was not lost to him, that she never could have been.

So John Treherne had generously restored to him the one thing out of his brilliant past that he had found it most hard to do without—only a memory, certainly, but no bad exchange for the worthless old grandfather, whom his last surviving male relative had long since, in happy ignorance of their relationship, recommended to the almshouse.

CHAPTER XXII.

SINCE the time, spoken of in a former chapter, spent by Evelyn Graham with her lover in London, they had not met. When last up in town he had found, to his great relief, that she was paying a round of visits, farewell visits, to the relations who, in virtue of her matrimonial prospects, were quite prepared to make much of her. But amid all her wanderings from country house to country house, her one thought was him still—only him, and the house she was to share with him. And this she had repeated over and over again, and very prettily too ; for now that the wedding-day was so fast approaching, and the *trousseau*, being all ordered, no longer took up so much of her

time and thoughts, she had more of both to devote to the absent lover, and therefore her letters became longer and more frequent. There they lay in the drawer of his writing-table, a goodly pile, telling of undying love and womanly affection, a very natural mixture of maidenly devotion and fashionable gossip, throughout all that time of heart-sickening doubt, anxiety, and suspense. But that was over, at least. There was nothing more to fear, for there was nothing more to lose.

It was when thinking over all he had lost, that he remembered the woman whose fate was so closely bound up with his; and he wrote to her, as he thought of her, more tenderly, perhaps, than he had ever done before. He said that the change in his fortunes must, of course, part them for a while; but it would only be to add another year or two to the many she had already waited for him, and they were both young enough to wait. Her lover would work to provide her with a home worthy of her, and

she would yet see her husband an M.P. This he added playfully, as you would try to comfort a child for the breaking of a favourite toy by the promise of a new one.

Having despatched the letter, he felt more light-hearted and hopeful for the future than he had done for many weeks past. Nothing like having another dependent upon you to rouse you to exertion, more particularly after a great shock. Having lost so much, it was but natural he should put a higher value upon what was left to him; and Evelyn, with her beauty, was worth something, after all! It was with a certain proud satisfaction that he thought of that beauty now, so soft, and high bred, and fair. Her stately presence would link the present to the past. It would be pleasant, very pleasant, to have her in his home; she would bring to it an atmosphere of grace and refinement that, much as he had once professed to despise all such unnecessary adjuncts, he now felt to be somehow necessary to his well-being. Yes, her

beauty was worth something, and so were her youth, and gentle, womanly devotion. It was no wonder that, having lost so much—all indeed that had hitherto been his life—there should creep over the large, strong heart a sense of loneliness; and at such times it was that he thought of Evelyn, and felt that it would comfort him more than anything else could, to have the full, white arms about his neck, the soft kisses from the full, shapely lips upon his face. In short, it would be very pleasant for Carlton Rickharts to have John Treherne's fair cousin as his wife.

A day or two after the writing of the letter he was called up to London on business. As he was walking down Piccadilly, whom should he meet but Sir John Graham—or rather they would have met, face to face, had not the baronet, when within a few yards of him, turned sharply down a narrow passage.

Carlton Rickharts, never for a moment suspecting, in his calm self-sufficiency, a

wish on the part of his ever affectionate cousin and future father-in-law to avoid him, hurried after the retreating figure, and with a few mighty strides overtook it.

Sir John gave a convulsive start, of surprise, no doubt, at the unexpected and welcome meeting. His greeting was eager and gracious in the extreme, but he seemed in a violent hurry. "He had to reach the bank before it closed." In answer to an inquiry after his daughter—"Miss Graham, —oh, she is well, quite well, couldn't be better. Had he got her letter? No, not yet, of course; it would be forwarded to him—she had written. Was he making any long stay in town? So sorry he, the baronet, would not see him; they were leaving early the next morning. Evelyn was spending the afternoon at Richmond. Hoped they would meet again soon." Then, seeing a chance of escape, down the passage he bolted; while Mr. Rickharts, still calmly unconscious of any intended slight, turned quietly on his heel and retraced his steps.

“Half an hour yet to the closing of the bank,” he said, looking at his watch; “he need not have been in such a hurry.” Then he pursued his way in the direction of the baronet’s house. If Evelyn were not at home he would leave a message appointing an interview for that evening. She had always made too great a favour of his visits, been too softly grateful, made too much of him, in short, from her babyhood, for him to entertain any doubts as to her reception of him. Miss Graham was not out, however; and saying that he did not care to be announced, he went straight to the drawing-room, where Evelyn sat in a large, low chair before the fire.

She heard the door open, but she did not look round. She was expecting afternoon tea, and was at all times averse to any extra exertion, even that of turning her fair head unnecessarily.

“Well, Evelyn.”

At the sound of the familiar voice she started as she had certainly never done in

her life before—as joy, or pain, or surprise could not have made her start, or any other emotion but the one that had taken sudden and entire possession of her. Had she looked up quietly from her firelight meditations, which meant afternoon nap, to see a ruffian head appear at the window, followed by a pair of ruffian shoulders, and hands armed with murderous weapons, she might have felt and looked very much as she did then.

Her lover advanced with hand outstretched, a warm, glad light in the grey eyes and on the rugged but noble features.

She had risen to her feet and faced him, a bright flush upon her cheek, which became her well, her lips parted, her breast heaving. How handsome she looked! He was at once struck with her beauty, and touched by it. Her dress, her attitude, the full, grand outline of her figure, and of the proud, classical features, the soft splendour of her complexion—nothing was lost upon him. He forgot at the moment how insipid

he had often found her, how her platitudes had bored him, how little real feeling she had ever had power to awaken; he saw only her beauty, he saw that she was fair and of a goodly presence, and his heart yearned to her as it had never done before.

“Did I startle you, dear?” his voice so rich and caressing.

She did not answer him, she was too busy with her own thoughts. “He has not received my letter. He still looks upon himself and me as engaged. He will be trying to kiss me,” with an irrepressible shudder. “What shall I do!”

Yes, he certainly had some idea of kissing the woman who was to be his wife. He was approaching rapidly; another moment, and he would have her in his arms! As he advanced, she instinctively retreated, moving aside until she had placed the big centre table as a sort of barrier between them.

The involuntary movement took Carlton Rickharts by surprise. He stopped short,

and a frown gathered over his eyes, giving them a look unpleasant to meet. He had not expected her to spring forward to meet him, that was not her way; she would await him, smiling and well pleased, upon the hearthrug. Smiling and well pleased, she would accept his kisses, and return them too, to any amount that might be asked for. Such had invariably been her welcome of him hitherto; but now there had been no welcome at all.

“Did you not wish to see me, Evelyn?” he asked, coming to the point at once, as he always did.

“Oh yes, of course,” she stammered confusedly, edging yet more to the centre of the table; “but I—did not know you were in town, and papa made me write and tell you that—as we could not marry, it would be better for us not to—meet.”

The frown still lay dark and portentous over the grey eyes, but their expression had softened. Living among girls of a certain class only, and a certain stamp, he had

never looked upon them as responsible, independent beings who could think and act for themselves. Her father had bullied her into giving him up, but he knew the man too well to fear him as an opponent. He might bully the girl, he dare not bully the man.

“Evelyn,” he said, with all the old brusque imperiousness in his tone, “your father has no right to part us, and I don’t mean that he shall; he gave you to me once, and I mean to keep you. I can’t marry you now, but you must wait for me. Why, child, our life is but just beginning, yours and mine; we can afford to wait. I will work for you twice as hard as I should for myself alone, and when I have a home worthy of you, you must come to it. Your father will consent to this, or anything else I may propose to him,” with something of scorn in the voice, “after five minutes’ interview. Will you wait for me?”

It is possible that had it been her cousin, Carlton Treherne, who spoke, she would

have given the required promise, and been true to him in spite of his poverty. Habit is second nature, and she had from her cradle been accustomed to look up to and submit to him; and to become his wife had been the one ambition of her otherwise torpid life. To submit once more to his will, and wait on, trusting in his word and his ability to make a fortune, might have saved trouble, the trouble of thwarting him, and of looking elsewhere. Independently of his position, too, she had been fonder of the man, in her own way, than she ever had been or ever could be of another: his was a type apart, not to be found among those with whom she mixed. She admired, looked up to, and believed in him, and might have found it harder to give him up than keep faith with him. But from the moment he ceased to be Carlton Treherne, and had become plain Mr. Rickharts, he had ceased to exist for her. For the past, she felt neither shame nor resentment; it had been all a mistake. Her long attach-

ment, the advances she had made, the kisses she had given and accepted, had been the result of a mistake. With her cousin she had lost her lover. Mr. Rickharts, the gamekeeper's son, could be no more to her than the footman who waited upon her, or any one of the peasants on her father's estate. It was not, therefore, to be expected that either his presence or his lover's words could excite feelings that were dead.

He was watching her keenly, and guessed something of the truth. A long, heavy silence fell between them. She had not anything more to say to him, and never would have so long as they two lived. There was an ominous pause; then he walked straight up to where she stood, and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Let us understand each other. Do you mean to wait for me, or to throw me over?"

Again he waited for an answer, but he got none; nor would he have got one had he waited twice as long. The fact was, that

his close contact, the heavy pressure of his hand, the sternness of his voice, had reduced poor Evelyn to a state of the most abject terror. The soft flesh actually shrank and quivered beneath his touch; her heart beat as no emotion but that of fear could have made it beat; her face turned from red to white, and her one only thought was escape. Had her companion been Carlton Treherne, however roughly he might have handled her, she could never have been afraid of him; however rough his touch, and stern his voice, she would have felt sure of him: a Treherne must be a gentleman. *Noblesse oblige*. But this peasant-born man, this gamekeeper's son, to what lengths might he not go in his baffled rage? The very size and strength she had always so admired, now made her shudder; noble, good, and generous as she had always known him, there was no enormity of which she did not, in her fright, then believe him capable. She thought of the dreadful story she had lately read in the

papers of the bargeman who had murdered his sweetheart ; and then a perfect flood of crime swept across her quaking spirit—strikes, Fenianism, murders, outrages. She had often heard it said how dangerous the lower orders were when roused. He was low-born—a Radical, and—he had hold of her arm ! Her eyes rolled wildly around. She was out of reach of the door, of a bell, of every means of escape. What would become of her ! And all the time he was looking at her with troubled surprise. He had seen woman in almost every phase—wilful, provoking, passionate, fond, foolish, and tiresome ; but to see her pale, breathless, trembling, shrinking from and crouching before him, like some hunted creature longing for escape, this was a novel experience, and a painful one. He turned her firmly, but not ungently, round until she faced him, considered her some minutes in silence, then slowly dropped his hand from hers, and broke into a short laugh.

“ Why, girl, one would think I was a

Bluebeard of a husband, instead of a lover you may betray and throw over as you please. You had a perfect right to turn me off, and I had as good a right to speak my mind. But why can't you look me in the face? You have nothing to fear, and nothing to be ashamed of, no doubt. Any other woman would have acted as you have done. You gave yourself to the fortune and position, and not, as I was fool enough to believe, to the man. To take the one without the other two would be a bad bargain, and no woman can be expected to make a bad bargain. It's all over between us now. I shall not trouble you again, either with my presence, or a regret. Good-bye, Evelyn; may you be more fortunate in your next venture."

At the door he turned once more, and gave her a last look. She was very handsome, certainly, and would have done admirably for Carlton Treherne's wife, or Carlton Rickharts' wife either, when he had built up, out of his broken fortunes, a home

large enough to receive her—that capacious, imposing presence would never have done for a cottage. Anyhow, it was all over between them now. He realized that perfectly, and that it was not at that moment the length of a room that lay between them, but a yawning, impassable chasm. Between him and her, as between his past and his future, there was—the Great Gulf Fixed!

“Thank God he is gone! How dreadful, to be sure! I wonder he did not murder me. I’m sure I thought he would!” And, quite pale and exhausted, poor Evelyn sank into a chair—not the first at hand, but the largest, most comfortable, and nearest to the fire.

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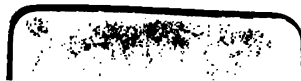
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